

AstraZeneca sponsors African Institute for Digestive Diseases

AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals has donated R150 000 to the African Institute of Digestive Diseases (AIDD) headed by Prof Reidwaan Ally. The sponsorship was presented by James Ward-Lilley, regional vice president: AstraZeneca Central, Eastern Europe, Middle East Africa (CEEMEA), during a recent visit to the continent.



The AIDD is housed within the gastrointestinal unit at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, one of the largest teaching hospitals in the world (3,400 beds), has been operational since June 2000, and at launch was the first of its kind to be opened on African soil. The AIDD was championed by the Organisation Mondiale de Gastro-Enterologie (OMGE) which later became known as the World Gastroenterology Organisation; the body that governs gastroenterology.

The mandate of the AIDD is to provide an institute of excellence for the hands-on training and education of doctors, nurses, and technicians primarily from sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2000, nine doctors and other allied medical staff have spent between one and two years training at the unit. So successful has this approach been that two further sites have been set up in Africa for the same purpose with one in Rabat (Morocco: which serves mainly the francophone African countries) and one in Cairo (Egypt: which serves mainly the Arabic African countries). Outside of the African continent a further 10 more sites have been set up in the Asia Pacific region and South America.

Speaking at the hand over ceremony, Ward-Lilley said that "In Africa for Africa" is the AstraZeneca vision which shapes the way the pharmaceutical company operates - always in an ethical and responsible manner - and selects its corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects. The sponsorship of this initiative is also consistent with the company's expansion plans which aim to grow the pharmaceutical's presence in sub-Saharan Africa through the roll-out of a capacity building strategy in 2009 that will broaden access of AstraZeneca's medicines to more patients.

AstraZeneca is already operational in a number of countries, in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mauritius, Seychelles, Botswana and Namibia. Originally managed from the UK, a restructuring within the group now sees the responsibility for these countries falling under the stewardship of South Africa. Ward-Lilley who headed up AstraZeneca China for over two-years, during which time he took the company to a leading

position, is now responsible for the CEEMEA regions. He has vast experience in leading business in emerging markets; a quality that will fast track the company's expansion plans on the continent.

Under the expert guidance of Prof Ally, a man with a passion for medical education, the AIDD continues to make an important contribution to the improvement of healthcare on the continent. The GI unit, which handles emergencies, GIT cancers, liver, pancreas and gall bladder diseases, nutrition and HIV related GIT diseases (such as diarrhoea and weight loss), performs 4 000 endoscopies per annum and is the referral centre for highly skilled endoscopic procedures such as ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangio pancreatography).

Major killer diseases in Africa including diarrhoea, malnutrition, viral hepatitis and AIDS affecting the digestive system are becoming increasingly common. The resources to investigate and manage these diseases are generally scarce. Continuing medical and post-graduate education is extremely limited as is access to facilities with sophisticated diagnostic equipment like endoscopes and ultrasound machines. "The support being offered by AstraZeneca will help to educate and train doctors which will enable them to better manage gastrointestinal diseases and to make a difference in their countries," said Ally.

Commenting on the sponsorship, AstraZeneca South Africa CEO, Dr Guni Goolab said: "In the developing world, effective healthcare is dependent on the availability of appropriate medicines and having a functional healthcare system in place. To help meet this challenge, we have engaged in partnerships to focus on strengthening healthcare capability."

"It's clear that in the field of gastroenterology it's necessary to harness health workers on an intercontinental scale in order to ameliorate diseases in Africa, to improve standards of health education and to inspire confidence that Africa can contribute to the solutions of medical problems on this vast continent. There is now an opportunity to break down artificial borders and cultural barriers and to pool the African continent's rich resources of talented people," said Goolab. Final closing comments made by Goolab at the ceremony included the fact that AstraZeneca supports the achievement of the millennium development goals and as one of the fastest growing pharmaceutical companies in South Africa is committed to being part of the solution.

Committed to the field of gastroenterology, AstraZeneca originally contributed to the establishment of the AIDD; is a supporter of the continuing medical education (CME) of local gastroenterologists; and since 2003 has funded R100 000 per annum for a new researcher - a commitment that is in place for 10-years.

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