

18th International Society for Research in Human Milk & Lactation (ISRHML 2016)

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Dr Gretel Finch explaining her poster during the poster session.

Approximately 160 academics and professionals from all over the world attended ISRHML 2016, some involved directly in the field of human milk and lactation and others indirectly. The conference was held at the Spier Hotel in Stellenbosch, Cape Town, South Africa.

Thursday morning began with registration, followed by workshops. Two workshops ran in parallel in the morning, with two more in the afternoon. In the evening, we had a wonderful welcome session. We all participated in an activity where we were

grouped according to our continents of birth and had the opportunity to network with fellow researchers from these continents. We then had to “migrate” and interact with researchers from other continents. This was quite an interesting activity: I met a number of people, found out what they were doing, and also learned about breastfeeding issues within their countries.

Dinner was then served, after which we had fun with a Xhosa traditional group. We did some drum beating and bum whacking. We made a beautiful melody as a group, while the leader of the traditional group conducted the “choir.” I realized that as long as we are in agreement as a group, we can achieve great things, even if we all come from different backgrounds and may not know each other well.

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We had our opening session on Friday morning and were warmly welcomed to Stellenbosch by Prof. Marietjie de Villiers, Vice Dean of Education at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences of Stellenbosch University. Lars Bode – the ISRHML President-Elect from the University of California, San Diego, United States – gave the opening remarks. Lars mentioned how this conference was designed to provide opportunities for trainees to interact with experts in the field of human milk and lactation. A number of activities had been put in place to help trainees network with the experts. This included a “Meet the Experts Breakfast” that was held on the Saturday morning.

After the opening remarks, we went straight into the oral sessions. These went on right through the conference and were divided into seven scientific sessions involving 32 presenters.



Preparation for the drumming session during the Welcome Function

The sessions

Session 1: “Breastfeeding in the context of HIV,” chaired by Louise Kuhn (Columbia University, New York, United States) and drawing on the input of five speakers.

Session 2: “Breast milk and pathogen protection,” chaired by Evette van Niekerk (Stellenbosch University, South Africa). This session involved four speakers.

Session 3: Chaired by Rukhsana Haider (Bangladesh), with three presenters discussing “Breastfeeding programs in the middle-income and developing countries.”

Session 4: Chaired by Michelle McGuire (Washington State University, Washington, United States), entitled “Obesity, diabetes and milk secretion.” This session had five presentations.

Session 5: With four presentations, this session was entitled “Minerals in milk: developmental biology and requirements in infants and their mothers,” and was chaired by Anne Prentice.

Session 6: Chaired by Peggy Neville (University of Colorado, United States), this session focused on “Epithelial barrier in mammary gland and intestines.” The session was covered by five presenters.

Session 7: This session had five speakers and focused on “Breastfeeding, infant growth, body composition, and later obesity.” The session was chaired by Kim F Michaelsen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

What I learned

I attended the session on “Essentials of basic research in human milk and lactation” chaired by Peggy Neville (University of Colorado, United States) and the workshop on “Analysis of Big Data” chaired by Darryl Hadsell (Baylor College of Medicine, Texas, United States). I took away the following insights from these workshops:

- > The importance of establishing a hypothesis. Research should be hypothesis-driven, not results-driven. It is important to work on one hypothesis before moving on to the next, rather than working on multiple hypotheses simultaneously. When formulating a hypothesis, first define what you don’t know rather than what you do know.
- > The greatest advantage in the use of animal models in research is that one gets to control the trial environment, and this enables one to make observations without the influence of confounders.
- > Analysis of Big Data on economics in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit shows that breastfeeding not only reduces morbidities in very low birth weight infants but also reduces the cost of hospitalization.

From the oral presentations, I took away the following key learnings:

- > Research has proved that giving ARV prophylaxis to either the mother or the infant can facilitate 12 months of breastfeeding for the infant with a reduced risk of infection with HIV. Prophylaxis during pregnancy from 14 weeks and right through lactation will suppress viral load and hence reduce HIV transmission to the infant. Giving prophylaxis to the mother may be a challenge; it should be given to the infant instead.
- > The role of both the mass media and social media in promoting breastfeeding was highlighted. For example, in Vietnam it was realized that one of the hindrances to exclusive breastfeeding was a belief that there is a need to “wash down” after a meal. Hence, babies were made to drink water after eating. To address this issue, an advertisement was created for national TV. Exclusive breastfeeding rates tripled. This was not only a result of the use of mass media, however. It was also the consequence of the provision of timely and good-quality education on breastfeeding, engaging policy-makers in policy crafting and implementation and the use of quantitative and qualitative data to inform intervention programs.
- > In animal models, it was shown that adiposity before and during pregnancy leads to developmental mishaps, which include impairment of the lactation capacity of the females, delayed onset of lactogenesis, and physical challenges related to nursing position.

On Friday, we were able to meet local trainees. We had an opportunity to discuss our role in promoting and protecting breastfeeding by focusing on the characteristics of the “Big Five” – the lion, buffalo, rhino, elephant and leopard. One of the conclusions we drew is to be aggressive in our approach to protecting breastfeeding, just as some of these animals are when it comes to protecting their young.

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“From the ‘Big Five’ African animals we learned to be aggressive in our approach to protecting breastfeeding”

Coffee breaks and lunchtime each day provided time for networking and interacting. People gathered in groups to discuss various issues. It was a time to learn from one another and to share information, a time to make new acquaintances.

There were social activities that lightened the mood, providing a contrast to the “serious” sessions of the day. Friday evening was devoted to grape stomping with bare feet, and on Saturday evening a gala dinner was held at an exclusive restaurant on the Cavalli Estate. A free Sunday afternoon gave people time to explore the beauty of Cape Town. Various tours were available – to the streets of Cape Town, Table Mountain, and Robben Island.

There were two poster presentation sessions on the evenings of the Friday and the Saturday. I had the privilege of presenting my poster entitled “Breast milk intake, energy, and fat content of breast milk: A 4-day test-weighting study in exclusively breastfed South African infants and their mothers.”

I greatly appreciate the support given me by *Sight and Life*, which enabled me to attend this conference: it was such a great opportunity for me as an upcoming researcher in the field of human milk and lactation. I had the chance to garner information directly from experts in the field as well as from fellow trainees. I learned a lot and gained some valuable new insights into how I can address the challenges I face as I carry out my research.

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