

## GASTROENTEROLOGY AND HEPATOLOGY IN CROATIA – WHERE ARE WE AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Over the last two years, gastroenterology as a profession has suffered great blow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has left strong impact and an inevitable mark on all areas of medicine, as well as on life in general.

While learning about life in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed new insights into the impact of SARS-CoV2 on the liver, biliary system, digestion tract, immune system, as well as on the outcomes of the infection in patients with malignancies, liver cirrhosis, inflammatory bowel disease, autoimmune liver diseases, or transplanted patients that we treat with immunosuppressive therapy and biologic drugs. COVID-19 has given rise to a huge challenge upon the entire healthcare system, and has made it difficult for chronic gastroenterology and hepatology patients to receive regular monitoring and specialist care. The profession has to find ways to continue working, primarily in endoscopy units, and to find new paths and channels to communicate with their chronic patients. Over the last two years, all these topics have been the subject of research in the Croatian and global scientific community, and part of the papers related to these issues have been presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Croatian Society of Gastroenterology with International Participation, which is the topic of this special edition.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the quality of life of all people, in particular patients with chronic diseases. We could also observe a higher incidence of depression, an epidemic of obesity, and we can soon expect an epidemic of malignancies due to the healthcare system being overburdened by COVID-19 patients and difficulties in the implementation of malignancy prevention and early detection programs. The colorectal cancer prevention program in Croatia has also come to a temporary halt during the epidemic, but in spite of that, a supplement to this program is being prepared in terms of opportunistic screening for colorectal cancer in high-risk patients in family medicine practices. The guidelines for this opportunistic screening for colorectal cancer developed and supported jointly by several professional associations (Croatian Society of Gastroenterology, Preventive Activities and Endoscopic Sections; Coordination of Croatian Family Medicine; Croatian Society of Family Doctors; Croatian Association of Family Medicine; and Association of Lecturers in General Practice/Family Medicine) were presented for the first time to the professional public during the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Croatian Society of Gastroenterology with International Participation, and are here provided in their entirety.

The obesity epidemic, which has been a global healthcare issue even before the COVID-19 pandemic, is associated with a range of chronic diseases and disorders related to the metabolic syndrome. Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, or as it is sometimes called nowadays, metabolic dysfunction-associated fatty liver disease, is also the subject of numerous studies presented at the Congress. The increasing burden of the disease which, due to the lack of symptoms, often remains unrecognized until the end stages of liver disease, while at the same time increasing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, as well as overall mortality, and imposing the need for screening patients at an increased risk of developing nonalcoholic (metabolically caused) fatty liver disease, their timely identification, treatment and monitoring. In this regard, the Hepatology Section and Preventive Activities Section of the Croatian Society of Gastroenterology have developed guidelines for diagnosing, screening, monitoring and treating nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, which were also presented during the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Croatian Society of Gastroenterology, and published in this special edition.

However, fortunately, the profession and science have not stopped working on other segments of gastroenterology and hepatology. In this issue, we present compelling papers in the field of endoscopy, ultrasound and

endoscopic ultrasound, diseases of the liver and pancreas, inflammatory and functional bowel diseases, treatment of *Helicobacter pylori* and other gastrointestinal infections, and clinical diet.

Modern medicine requires interdisciplinary cooperation that delves into an increasing number of areas of gastroenterology, thus the papers tackle topics ranging from pathology, radiology and surgery of the gastrointestinal system to molecular diagnostics and oncology. Some interesting topics from a new area have also emerged, namely, the use of artificial intelligence in gastroenterology and hepatology, which is still in its early days in Croatia, but we do believe that such research will see a major upswing in the coming years.

It is hard to predict how the gastroenterology profession will progress in the future, as well as medicine in general, but we have been witnessing the development of several different directions and areas that mutually intertwine and complement each other.

On the one hand, there is the need to standardize the practice and evidence-based medicine, and in this regard, we can observe an increasing use of guidelines or recommendations for the diagnosis, management, prevention and treatment of specific diseases. On the other hand, increasing prominence is being given to the need for an individualized approach to the patient and for 'personalized' medicine, while ever more attention is also being paid to the quality of life. The great burden upon the system, however, imposes the need to automatize part of the work, where computers using artificial intelligence are partially supposed to simplify or facilitate the work of physicians. This is also being achieved by advanced technology and development of new medications, less invasive and sophisticated methods that significantly improve the diagnosis and treatment of a range of diseases in gastroenterology and hepatology. It is precisely the accelerated development of the profession, science and technology that requires multidisciplinary cooperation and an interdisciplinary approach.

We believe that the papers presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Croatian Society of Gastroenterology with International Participation represent a valuable contribution to science and the profession, and will serve as an impetus for future research and cooperation.

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