

# THE 1<sup>ST</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE AFRICAN HELICOBACTER AND MICROBIOTA STUDY GROUP



The inaugural International Conference of the African Helicobacter and Microbiota Study Group (AHMSG) took place at the President Hotel in Bantry Bay, Cape Town, from August 16–17, 2024. This event marked a significant milestone for the group, which first convened virtually in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by an in-person launch meeting in Lagos, Nigeria, in 2022.

AHMSG has 16 board members representing 10 African countries: Nigeria, South Africa, Cameroon, Tanzania, Kenya, Senegal, Zambia, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Morocco. Our primary goal is to unify and consolidate efforts to address the challenges posed by *Helicobacter pylori* infections across Africa, offering solutions tailored to the unique needs of the continent. The group also includes over 90 members, extending our representation to 18 countries.

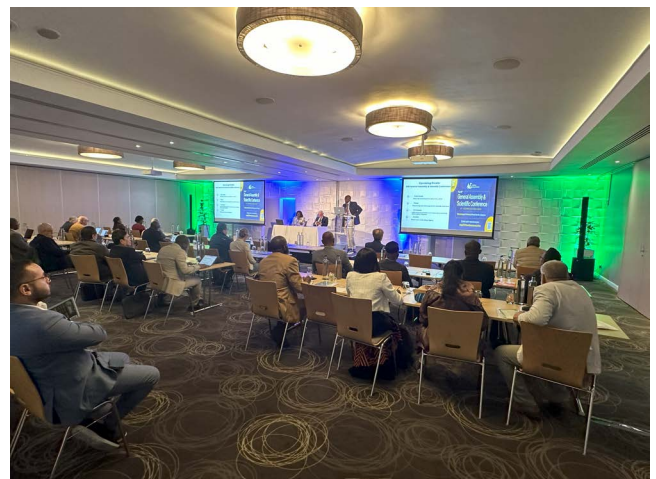
Professor Stella Smith, from the Nigerian Medical Institute (NIMR), is the founder of the AHMSG and served as the first president of the Group. In Lagos, we drafted a constitution that mandates a biannual rotation of the conference location among member countries, as well as the presidency and secretary-general roles. Cape Town was chosen to host the first conference in 2024.

The conference was truly international yet firmly grounded on African soil. We were honoured by the support of esteemed members of the European Helicobacter and Microbiota Study Group (EHMSG), including keynote speaker Professor Peter Malfertheiner, as well as prominent global experts on *Helicobacter*

*pylori*. The first day began with a welcome from Prof. Smith, followed by video footage from our 2022 launch in Nigeria. Goodwill messages were shared by Prof. Chris Kassienedis (founder of GHASSA), Dr. Ernst Fredericks (president of SAGES), and Prof. Anthony Okoh from the African Academy of Sciences.

The keynote address was followed by insightful presentations from international experts such as Prof. Christian Schulz, Prof. Marcis Leja, Prof. Christian Abet, and Prof. Yoshio Yamaoka, all of whom were present in person. Two speakers, Prof. Gianluca Ianiro and Prof. Naima Lahbabi-Amrani, delivered their talks virtually. A notable focus was placed on the microbiome, highlighted by Prof. Ianiro's talk on "Why African Microbiomes Matter" and a presentation by Prof. Thulani Makhalanyane from Stellenbosch University on the significance of establishing a microbiota consortium. We were also honoured to have national expert Prof. Reid Ally, who delivered a masterful lecture on the complexities of managing *Helicobacter pylori* within the African context. Another talk from a national was by Mr Ebrahim Hoosein, a microbiologist who spoke on the diagnostic modalities for *Helicobacter pylori*. The remaining talks over both days were given by the AHMSG board members.

The second day began with oral presentations and concluded with a lively debate on the existence (or lack thereof) of the "African enigma," which sparked robust discussion. The conference wrapped up with awards and prizes, after which Prof.



Smith officially handed over the presidency to me—a role I will serve in for two years until our next meeting in Zambia in 2026.

For a first conference, both in-person and virtual attendance exceeded expectations, especially for such a specialised event. The success of this meeting is largely thanks to the months of preparation; here I wish to specifically acknowledge the significant contributions of Prof Smith, whose leadership was exemplary. Her experience, tireless efforts and support were a great resource to make this conference a reality. We also enjoyed the invaluable support of our international faculty, and expert logistical management by Bini Seale and Juliet Desilla from

Cornucopia Communications. Indeed this meeting would not be possible without the generosity of all our sponsors.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable and intellectually stimulating event. I look forward to many more years of growth, productivity, and the generation of vital data that can influence policy, guidelines, and outcomes for the vulnerable populations we serve across Africa.

To join as a member and peruse the work of the AHMSG please visit our website: <https://ahmsg-africa.org/>

**Mashiko Setshedi**