

# Interview With American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases President Dr. Anna Lok

**W**e recently caught up with American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) president Dr. Anna Lok to discuss the society's recent accomplishments and future goals as well as Dr. Lok's advice for the next generation of hepatologists.

In addition to being AASLD's current president, Dr. Lok is director of Clinical Hepatology and the assistant dean for Clinical Research at the University of Michigan where she sees patients, conducts research, and mentors three junior faculty members, one gastroenterology Fellow, and a visiting scholar from China. She recently shared the following thoughts on her experience as a member and leader of AASLD.

*Can you provide some historical perspectives detailing your own involvement with AASLD?*

I am honored and humbled to be selected to serve as president of AASLD—the premier hepatology society

with more than 5,000 members around the world. I first joined AASLD 30 years ago, and it has been my professional home since.

Being a member of AASLD has benefited me in many ways, providing opportunities

- to present my research findings
- to meet other investigators in the field, to learn from them and to collaborate
- to speak and moderate at postgraduate courses, meeting sessions/workshops, and single topic conferences (STCs)
- to serve as associate editor of *Hepatology*
- to serve on committees and hone my leadership skills.

AASLD and the field of hepatology have grown immensely since my first Liver Meeting in 1983.

While we have made much progress, there remain many liver diseases for which our understanding is limited and our ability to treat is constrained. As the incidence and prevalence of some liver diseases decrease, others persist or emerge. Hepatology remains an exciting specialty for young physicians and investigators. There is no better time to become a hepatologist and a researcher in liver diseases.

*You just chaired your first Governing Board meeting in March 2017 as the sixty-eighth president of AASLD. Can you share with the readers of Hepatology Communications some of the upcoming opportunities, initiatives, and trends we can expect for the membership of AASLD?*

I am very excited to share with our members a wide array of new initiatives catered to each of our constituent groups. Our membership increased from 3,486 in 2012 to 5,433 at last count, with the greatest growth in trainees and associate members.

**Trainees:** Five years ago, we launched the Emerging Liver Scholars Program to attract and cultivate residents in internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and pathology to hepatology. To date, 147 residents have gone through

*Abbreviations: AASLD, American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases; MOC, maintenance of certification; STC, single topic conference.*

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this program and 70% are currently undergoing or have completed gastroenterology/hepatology training. The number of applicants has increased from 17 in 2012 to 102 in 2016. AASLD Governing Board just approved a 5-year extension of this program, and we are planning to increase the funding allocated to this program. We are also expanding this program to include medical students and Ph.D. students.

**Trainee members and young investigators:** We started a mentoring program in 2015, matching Fellows of AASLD to trainees and young investigators. This program was for domestic members only in 2015 and was extended to international members in 2016. Watch for announcements in June for an opportunity to be matched to an expert in the field.

The Liver Meeting has always included many programs, such as the Career Development Workshop and Clinical Research Symposium, designed for trainee members and young investigators. In 2015, academic debates were introduced. Also in 2015, we started scheduling all these programs on Friday and designated it as Trainee Day, finishing the day with a trainee reception to provide a venue for trainees to get to know each other and to network. In 2016, we provided space for a young investigators' lounge to increase opportunities for networking among peers and consultation hours with established investigators.

In January 2017, we invited the chair of the Training and Workforce Committee Gautham Reddy to attend the Scientific Program Committee meeting to provide input on planning of The Liver Meeting program. While there are many programs specifically for trainees at The Liver Meeting, we will initiate several new programs to help our trainee members and young investigators acquire the skills they need to succeed. Many of these new programs are based on feedback from a young investigator focus group that was convened at The Liver Meeting 2016. In December 2017, we will for the first time partner with the European Association for the Study of the Liver in the Master Class program. This will be held alternately in Europe and in the United States. The program has been revised to focus on academic and leadership skills. In March 2018, we will again partner with the American Gastroenterological Association in the Academic Skills Workshop. To enable more hepatology young investigators to benefit from this workshop, AASLD will provide additional funds to increase the number of travel awards for hepatology fellows and junior faculty to attend the workshop and provide additional opportunities for them to network and seek advice on career development from experienced hepatology faculty. We will also

introduce Meet-the-Professor breakfast or lunch sessions at The Liver Meeting and at the Clinical Hepatology Update (formerly Midyear Course) to provide more opportunities for trainees and young investigators to interact with experienced hepatologists. In April, I met with the young investigator focus group through a conference call to hear from them directly about their needs and ideas and to share with them our plans.

We will also be conducting a survey to assess the current status of the hepatology workforce and future needs as well as compensation later this year.

**Trainee membership dues:** To attract trainees to join and to encourage them to stay, membership dues decreased to \$25 per year starting in January 2017, and at the March 2017 Governing Board meeting, we also approved a decrease in the membership fee during the transition period from trainee to full membership, \$125 in year 1 and \$250 in year 2.

Medical students, nursing students, and students studying for an N.P., P.A., or Pharm.D. now have their own membership category and dues of only \$25 per year. This important membership category will allow us to track a student all the way into residency, fellowship, and early career and to plan for the future of hepatology providers.

All the above reflects AASLD's serious commitment to the training and success of our next generation.

**Associate members:** They are one of the fastest growing constituent groups with diverse affiliations, including registered nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, and clinical research coordinators. We will also reach out to dietitians who play an increasingly important role in hepatology practice, and we will increase programs on nutrition and liver diseases.

We will be conducting a survey to better understand our associate members and the needs of each group so we can design programs that meet their needs.

In January 2017, we invited the chair of the Associates Committee Patrick Horne to attend the Scientific Program Committee meeting to provide input on planning of The Liver Meeting program. Starting in 2018, two representatives from the Associates Committee will be involved in planning the program for Clinical Hepatology Updates, allowing them to design programs catered to the needs of our associate members.

**Seasoned members:** We will continue to provide high-quality educational and scientific programs not only at The Liver Meeting but also throughout the year. STCs, which provided a venue for like minds to get together to discuss clinical and research topics of mutual interest and to network, will be resumed in

September 2017 and will be held annually going forward. In addition, there will be an Endpoints Conference, an Emerging Trends Conference, and a Clinical Hepatology Update each year. Ideas and programs will originate from special interest groups or committees, e.g., STC through special interest groups and Clinical Hepatology through Training and Workforce Committee/Practice Committee/Associates Committee. We also added six new committees in 2017 for a total of 22 committees that provide increased opportunities for our members to play a leading role in AASLD and to influence programming.

**Maintenance of certification (MOC):** For domestic members, American Board of Internal Medicine requirements for MOC are a major concern. In 2017, we established a committee dedicated to working with the American Board of Internal Medicine and sister societies to decrease the burden on our members and to create more opportunities to accrue MOC credits through participation in AASLD programs. The number of MOC credits our programs provide increased from 31.5 in 2015 to 95.75 in 2016.

**Fellows of AASLD:** The Fellows of AASLD program to honor our loyal members who have made significant contributions to the science and practice of hepatology will continue. Fellows have the opportunity to give back through our mentoring program.

**Innovation Fund launched in 2016:** Two proposals were funded in 2016. AASLD has committed \$250,000 each year for this program. There will be two cycles each year. Additional funds may be allocated if there are more meritorious proposals than can be covered by the current budget.

**Quality of care, patient outcomes, and performance metrics:** These are under increasing scrutiny and linked to payments. The Governing Board approved funding of phase 1 of the Cirrhosis Collaborative Project led by Fasiha Kanwal, Michael Volk, Amit Singal, and Jayant Talwalkar. The goals of this project are to (1) determine metrics of care for liver diseases, (2) develop a platform to collect data across hepatology practice, and (3) provide feedback to improve quality of care and patient outcomes. The project will initially focus on patients with cirrhosis, regardless of etiology, with a plan to include disease-specific data in the future.

*AASLD just initiated the Global Outreach and Engagement program in 2015. What feedback and experience have come from this program based on the initial 1-year history and what is the outlook for upcoming years?*

The Global Outreach and Engagement Task Force was established in late 2014 to foster collaborations

with sister societies. In 2017, the Global Outreach and Engagement Committee was established to continue this effort. The number of programs (endorsement/sponsorship) increased from 8 in 2015 to 17 by the first quarter of 2017. Requests for partnership have grown to the extent that we need to have a more streamlined and consistent process to review and approve these requests. At the March 2017 Governing Board meeting, we approved the updated endorsement and sponsorship policies. Going forward, we will have two cycles for requesting submissions, March 1 and September 1. There will be a rapid review and notification in May and November. In addition to responding to requests from other societies to collaborate, we will also proactively initiate collaborative programs with societies in other countries to promote the practice and science of hepatology. Stay tuned.

A marquee program of AASLD's global initiatives is the Research Methodology Workshop, which was inaugurated in 2004 in collaboration with the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver, to provide training in basic principles of clinical and translational research for young investigators through didactic sessions, case studies, poster presentations, and one-on-one discussions with experienced faculty. AASLD also provides funds for travel awards for selected young investigators. In 2016, this was expanded to the Latin America Association for the Study of the Liver and in 2017 to the Mexican Association of Hepatology.

*You are a leader and an emblematic role model for mentoring and investing in the careers and guidance of trainees and junior faculty. How are you bringing this passion to AASLD?*

My message to young investigators is take advantage of the opportunities that AASLD provides for training and career development, and network with peers and experienced hepatologists and researchers. Watch for announcements, inquire, and reach out. Self-introduce or ask a colleague to introduce and to connect you with mentors and collaborators. As a foreign medical graduate who had no training in the United States, I am where I am today with help from many AASLD members. I took advantage of opportunities to serve our society; I gained far more than what I put in. Over the years, I have invested much time and energy mentoring trainees and junior faculty not only in my own institute but also in other institutes. Many have asked why I spend time on things that do not benefit me, at least not directly. My response is I want to help others because someone helped me in the past. The world is a better place if we all contribute. Plus, the joys of seeing my

mentees succeed are immeasurable, and the gratification of witnessing them add another piece to the puzzle is beyond description. Reach out for help but also extend a hand to others; together we can do so much more than when we work in isolation.

*AASLD is and traditionally has been a very inclusive professional society that values diversity. As the fourth female president of AASLD, what is your message to our female colleagues and trainees?*

I feel very blessed that AASLD is my professional home and that AASLD values diversity. I am also blessed to have three outstanding role models: My mother, who taught me resilience, grew up in a wealthy family with several live-in maids, but within 3 years of marrying my father she was in a situation where my father was unemployed and had tuberculosis and I (the second child) was about to be born. Professor Rosie Young, my professor at the University of Hong Kong, was the second woman to become dean of my medical school and the first woman to become provost of the university. Now in her mid-80s, she is

still seeing patients and serving on the university council. Dame Sheila Sherlock, my mentor in hepatology, is a trail blazer who played a pivotal role in establishing hepatology as a specialty and the first woman to become the chair of medicine in the United Kingdom.

For young female trainees, my message is believe in yourself. It does not matter whether others believe you can succeed or not, you must believe that you can. Set your goals high but be realistic. Develop a plan for reaching your goals and persevere. Do not give up easily when you meet hurdles, but do recognize when to redirect if the initial plan is clearly not working. Reach out for help—none of us can do it all—and also extend a hand to help.

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