

# PIONEERING DIGESTIVE HEALTHCARE

**D**r Maxwell Asante is an experienced consultant gastroenterologist who practices at the BMI Sloane Hospital, Beckenham; BMI Chelsfield Park Hospital, Orpington; Sevenoaks Medical Centre and the Princess Royal University Hospital, Bromley. He consults in all areas of general gastroenterology but has a special interest in the evaluation, diagnosis and management of acid related disorders; alterations in bowel function such as IBS and colitis; food-related disorders; dysfunction of the liver; and diagnostic or therapeutic endoscopy. Dr Asante has researched and published widely in various areas of gastroenterology and leads in the development of local endoscopy services.

'The digestive system begins with the gullet (oesophagus), which delivers food from the mouth to the stomach where it is partially broken down with the aid of acid and enzymes,' says Dr Asante. 'The food is then transported down the small intestine where further breakdown occurs on contact with bile and pancreatic enzymes. Released nutrients and mineral nutrients are then absorbed. Next, the residue is transported to the large bowel



## PREVENTION IS THE KEY TO HEALTH

- Eat a balanced diet
- Drink adequate amounts of fluids
- Exercise regularly
- Drink alcohol in moderation if necessary
- Watch your weight
- Look after your emotional health and address stress and depression
- Listen and look for changes in your digestive system.

## SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE IF YOU HAVE:

- Persistent uncontrolled heartburn
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Unexplained weight loss
- Jaundice
- Anaemia
- New onset bowel symptoms, especially if accompanied by rectal bleeding,
- Severe abdominal pain
- Persistent vomiting.



(colon) where excess fluid is reabsorbed into the circulation, extra vitamins extracted and the waste expelled.

'This basic description of the digestive system belies the complex interaction that exists between the intestines, the brain and the immune system. Hence optimal digestive function is not only essential for adequate nutrition, it is essential for general wellbeing. Effects of digestive disturbance can manifest in organ systems far removed from the digestive system such as joints, the respiratory tract and the nervous system.'

## DISORDERS OF THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

'Synchronised muscle movements in the intestine help deliver food, fluids, acid and enzymes to the right places. The symptoms

resulting from digestive dysfunction can be very varied, so rigid explanations of intestinal dysfunction can lead to misdiagnosis.

'Symptoms can manifest in discomfort or difficulty in eating and swallowing; abdominal pain; jaundice; anaemia; weight loss; disturbed bowel function such as diarrhoea or constipation; and rectal bleeding. Not all of these symptoms imply an underlying disease. For example, constipation dating back many years can be normal for an individual, while recent onset constipation can signify underlying bowel disease or hormonal imbalance.

'Weight loss, anaemia, rectal bleeding, jaundice or difficulty in swallowing, however, may need urgent attention. Overlapping symptoms from different sections of the

digestive tract can be confusing hence the need for initial evaluation by an experienced clinician or general practitioner to initiate investigations or management targeted to the right organ.'

## DIAGNOSTIC PROCEDURES

'Traditional investigations with blood tests, X-rays, ultrasound, and endoscopy (camera inspection of stomach, large bowel, small intestine and bile duct) applied to the right question can be very useful,' says Dr Asante. 'But none can replace the ears, eyes and touch of an experienced clinician. More recent advances have enabled us to assess the motor and nerve function of various aspects of the digestive system. I am fortunate to have access to wireless devices to visualise the small bowel and quantify oesophageal and stomach

acid content. When necessary, I can inspect and treat structural abnormalities in the small bowel with dedicated cameras (enteroscopes). The information from these techniques can help refine surgical treatment and in some cases removes the need for surgery completely.'

## MANAGEMENT OF DISORDERS

'Modern gastroenterologists are fortunate to have a wide range of medications and strategies to manage acid-related conditions; intestinal motor dysfunction; disturbed liver function; deficiencies in pancreatic enzymes; food allergies such as coeliac disease; infections and infestations of the digestive tract; as well as persistent bowel inflammation (colitis). The success of these treatments depends on getting the diagnosis right in the first place.

'Not only do endoscopes enable me to visualise and diagnose structural and mucosal problems such as ulcers and bowel inflammation, it also allows me to remove polyps and dilate narrowed sections of the gullet, stomach and intestines,' says Dr Asante. 'They also enable me to remove escaped or trapped gallstones, apply laser treatment to fragile bleeding blood vessels and repair tiny holes in the intestines.

'The varied contributory factors to intestinal health including diet and emotions such as stress on digestive function cannot be overemphasised. I am fortunate to have the expertise of a network of dedicated teams consisting of dieticians, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, gastrointestinal surgeons and radiologists who can apply their expertise to the diagnosed problem in a multi-disciplinary setting.'

## THE FUTURE OF GASTROENTEROLOGY

'Research is the key to better diagnosis and treatment of gastro-intestinal diseases. Great strides continue to be made in the field of the causative factors in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), colitis, fat induced liver disease, food-related diseases and hepatitis. The knowledge emerging from genetic research will no doubt improve our management of many digestive diseases. Medications in the development pipeline will help control motor functions of the bowel and improve bowel symptoms. I continue to support and participate actively in clinical research to help advance our knowledge.'

## GET IN TOUCH...

### DR MAXWELL ASANTE

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