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UCT student team scoops research prize at transplant conference

SA Transplant Society awards prize for best original research presentation to two final-year medical students

For the first time, the South African Transplant Society (SATS) has presented its annual prize for the best original research presentation to two final-year medical students, for their research on the correlation between how a kidney functions in the first few days after transplantation, and the long-term outcome of the transplanted kidney.

UCT medical students Daniel Nel and Jonathan Vogel, both 24, presented a paper entitled "Slow early graft [kidney] function, a neglected entity in renal transplantation" to the annual conference of the SATS, which took place on 22 to 25 September 2011. Nel said: "We looked at all the local adult patients who had renal transplants at Groote Schuur Hospital over a five-year period. We found that an increased cold ischaemic time (the time taken from removing the kidney from the donor and implanting it into the recipient) was a significant risk factor for poor early kidney function. Thus, we recommended that surgeons reduce this time to as short as possible."

Nel added: "Our most important finding, however, was that slow or average early kidney function is almost as bad as poor early function and that these two should be grouped together. Most previous studies had only been comparing poor early function to good early function. They had not even considered the entity of slow early function, which possibly confounded their comparisons and has led to the controversy in the literature as to the impact of early function on long term outcome. Finally we found that patients with poor early kidney function stay in hospital longer and have a poorer long-term outcome; that is, their kidneys don't work as well at one year post transplant. Thus, we recommended that poor early function should be prevented where possible (by reducing the cold ischaemic time) and where it occurs, it should be managed effectively. This entails closer follow up of these patients and a much more aggressive approach to diagnosing and treating acute rejection, as the combination of poor early function and acute rejection has a significantly poorer long term outcome."

Prof Delawir Kahn, the head of the Department Surgery & Transplantation, at UCT, said: "The SATS meeting was a large national congress with several international guests. There were several free paper presentations on a variety of topics in transplantation. It was therefore quite an achievement to be awarded the prize for the best paper/presentation. Well done to Daniel and Jonathan."

Dr Elmin Steyn, the organiser of the SATS conference, told the two that it was highly unusual for medical students to even present at this conference, much less win the award for best presentation. Nel said: "Just to get a paper accepted is an honour, but to win best presentation is quite a big deal. We were privileged to have been able to do our research at the Groote Schuur Hospital renal transplant unit, which is a leading transplantation centre in South Africa and the African continent. The unit is led by Professor Kahn and we were really lucky to have had him as a supervisor and mentor throughout this process."

Prof Kahn said: "These two final-year medical students worked very independently in their spare time (on weekends) to collect data and then undertake the analysis of the data using quite advanced statistics. They demonstrated enormous insight into a fairly complex problem in kidney transplantation. They have subsequently submitted a manuscript for publication."

Nel said: "We chose to do this in our free time as we are passionate about surgery and research. It was a lot of extra work, but totally worth it." They also presented their paper at the conference of the Surgical Research Society of SA and at the Undergrad Research Day at the Health Sciences Faculty of UCT, where the team also won first prize for best oral presentation.

Both Vogel and Nel plan to specialise in surgery after they complete their internships.

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