Report on 9th ESPE Maghreb School held in Sousse, Tunisia, from Monday 18th to Saturday 23rd November 2019

The 9th ESPE Maghreb School took place in Hotel Iberostar in Sousse, by the Mediterranean Sea some 120 kilometres to the south of Tunis in November this year. This was the final year of the third cycle of Maghreb School meetings, which take place each year in either Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia.

The French-speaking Maghreb school comprises a faculty of seven professors from the Maghreb Countries - Thouraya Kamoun and Mongia Hachicha from Sfax, and Saayda Ben Becher from Tunis, Tunisia; Asmahane Ladjouze and Meriem Bensalah, from Algiers, Algeria; and Zineb Imane from Rabat and Sana Abourazzak from Fès, Morocco. Thouraya and Mongia took on the role of local coordinators this year and made an excellent team.

The European component of the teaching faculty comprised Juliane Léger from Paris and Marc Nicolinio from Lyon, France; Cécile Brachet from Brussels, Belgium, Guy Van Vliet from Montreal, Canada and Malcolm Donaldson [coordinator] from Glasgow, United Kingdom. Having been sad to say goodbye to Christina Kanaka from Greece last year, we were delighted to welcome Marc to Maghreb School this year.

The student faculty this year was the largest so far with 30 students, selected from Algeria (10), Morocco (10), Tunisia (8), Mauritania (1) and Senegal (1). Unusually, not a single student had to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances, such as illness, and so all 30 students were able to attend.

The faculty worked hard before the event itself. The students worked with their allocated teachers on their chosen clinical case and research project and the abstracts for these were printed as a booklet, available during the meeting. The PowerPoint presentations of each case and project were sent to the students’ tutors before the meeting for commentary and editing. An ESPE e-learning case was available from the online portal before the meeting, and an article on the effect of prenatal androgen on gender identity in 46, XY DSD was also sent out for study prior to the meeting.

The intensive four-day programme at Hotel Iberostar featured interactive lectures with focus on: pituitary disorders, basic molecular genetics, diabetes (insulin therapy, transition, monogenic and neonatal diabetes), gonadal disorders (primary insufficiency and PCOS), adrenal disorders (Cushing’s, adrenal insufficiency and CAH).

In small-group sessions comprising 2-3 teachers and 5-8 students, other topics were addressed - teachers’ cases, and presentation of student research projects. Each student delivered their case study to the plenum, and 8 students were selected to show their research project to the whole faculty.

The standard of student case presentations was again very high this year, so that the teachers struggled to choose the best. Finally, it was agreed to award the prize to Dr Jihene Methlouthi from Sousse for her case of familial neonatal hyperinsulinism. Among the research projects, some students had managed to advance their work from the previous years and to present data. The prize for the best research project was awarded to Dr Insaf Mehzoud from Constantine, Algeria, for her study on vitamin D status in type 1 diabetes.
On the Thursday of Maghreb School, the afternoon excursion was to Monastir where we visited the Ribat, a mediaeval fort, and then the mausoleum of Tunisia’s legendary president Habib Bourguiba. This was followed by a coach ride back to Sousse for a visit to the Archaeological Museum which features 2nd and 3rd century Roman mosaics of astonishing quality. The evening dinner was, as usual, in a traditional restaurant. This time we dined in a restaurant near Kantaoui Bay and enjoyed traditional Tunisian food including “La Gargoulette” (marinated lamb with herbs).

As always, there was much singing of French, English and Arabic songs during the precious free time in the evenings after the days’ work.

On the day after Maghreb School, the “6ème Séminaire Maghrébin d’Endocrinologie Pédiatrique” took place in the same venue – Hotel Iberostar. Two hundred and fifty paediatricians and endocrinologists from the Maghreb attended, including all the faculty members from this year’s Maghreb School. The main areas covered were diabetes, puberty, thyroid disorders and Turner syndrome. Invited speakers included some faculty teachers but also previous Maghreb School students and a representative from the Ministry of Health to discuss newborn screening which is still not established in Tunisia (or indeed any of the Maghreb countries). We are very grateful to ESPE for kindly covering the cost of this last day, which gives the opportunity for those interested people to feel part of and benefit from the ESPE Maghreb School.

This was, by common agreement, an excellent ESPE Maghreb School, and a very successful Maghreb Seminar. The reputation of Maghreb School as a model of training in paediatric endocrinology continues to grow throughout the three countries. To date, more than 100 young doctors have attended Maghreb School, of whom more than 50 have completed the maximum of three meetings.

This year we say farewell to Dr Malcolm Donaldson who was a co-founder of Maghreb School and who will be replaced by Professor Rasa Verkauskiene from Lithuania as teacher and by Asmahane Ladjouze as coordinator in 2020. We express our gratitude and thanks to Prs Thouraya Kamoun and Mongia Hachicha for all their hard work in making both Maghreb School and the 6th seminar such a success. We also thank Novo Nordisk for their support of Maghreb School since 2018.

The 10th Maghreb School is scheduled to take place in Morocco between 16 and 20 November 2020, with a 7th Maghreb Seminar envisaged on Saturday 21st November. Professors Sana Abourazzak and Zineb Imen have agreed to be the local organisers for this meeting, and applications will be invited from mid-March onwards, with a deadline of May 2020.

Malcolm Donaldson and Asmahane Ladjouze, on behalf of the Maghreb School faculty.
Maghreb School teaching and student faculty, Sousse, November 2019

Malcolm Donaldson (coordinator 2017-2019) shown right with Juliane Léger (coordinator 2011-16), and left handing over to coordinator-elect Asmahane Ladjouze
Delegates at the 6th Maghreb Seminar in Paediatric Endocrinology, Saturday 23rd November 2019