

CORRESPONDENCE

What do we gain from medical conferences?

Almost every alternate day an update, workshop or conference on some aspect of medical science is taking place at the local, zonal or national level. 'The purpose of an organization is to facilitate the communication between individuals of a common profession with the purpose of advancing their knowledge through the free interchange of their mutual experiences, observations, philosophies and conclusions (1).' Obviously, reading a journal at home does not educate in the same way as conference discussions could.

However, in conferences today, the most important criterion for the medical association or society hosting the conference seems to be the venue—it should be easily accessible, have good hotels for the delegates and have some tourist spots. Doctors also get to meet their colleagues and discuss professional problems, financial issues, malpractice hassles, or even life stories. Many of the doctors attend these conferences because their organisation sponsors them. The organiser wants to make the conference 'a hit' towards contesting for the post of 'President' or 'Secretary' of the governing council of the association. Pharmaceutical companies have stalls with programmes for accompanying spouses and children and sponsor delegate kits, lavish banquets and entertainment.

Usually, 200–300 papers are presented in various sessions of an annual conference, most of them being rehashes of the authors' previous work. In any case, attendance is pathetic as people rush between simultaneous sessions.

How can conferences be made more 'scientific'? The most important aspect is the organisational foresight and cooperation of groups to improve sessions. Papers

selected for presentation should be peer reviewed. Quality papers, the *sine qua non* of a successful meeting, can be expected only if the organisation carefully scrutinises the submitted abstracts. Duplicate presentation should be discouraged. Speakers should be chosen on the basis of their abilities, not their position or designation in the association. Bigwigs should be expected to do justice to the topic allotted to them, as many young trainees look up to them for professional guidance.

According to Gitanjali, 'What I expect speakers to do is share their expertise, experiences and in-depth knowledge with the audience and give the topic their own flavour, not reproduce what is on websites or project slides available on the net (2).' The chairpersons or judges should be informed well in advance of the papers to be presented in their sessions and they should be prepared accordingly. Parallel sessions should be banned, so that the audience can devote its time to the session and only top-quality scientific papers should fit in the scheduled time of the conference.

To conclude, 'I am confident that there will be a conference in the future where there will be no bags, no inaugural ceremonies, no banquets but top-quality science. I am waiting for that day (2).'

References

1. Baker WH. Medical meetings: the real value. *Bulletin of the American College of Surgeons* 2001;**86**:13–18.
2. Gitanjali B. Bags, banquets and boring speeches: the bane of conferences. *Indian J Pharmacol* 2003;**35**:348.

Kaushik Bhattacharya, A Neela Cathrine, Department of Surgery, Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute, Chennai 600116, India.
e-mail: kaushik_srmc@rediffmail.com

Correction

A number of editing errors were made in the article 'Why life-saving drugs should be public goods' by Rachana Kamtekar (IJME, 2004;**1**:77–8). These errors are regretted. The following corrections should be noted:

The second sentence in the introductory paragraph should read: 'Omar Swartz presents a number of good arguments in favour of treating the formulae for making HIV and other life-saving drugs as public goods rather than as private property: ideas can be shared without being used up; the most effective use of blueprints for life-saving medicine is to provide drugs to sick people; finally, it is clearly unreasonable if 'a person who owns something...can dispose of (or control access to) that [thing] ... without regard for others.'

The first sentence of the second paragraph should read: 'But where, in all of these considerations, do we find the claims of those who have devoted their labour, time, and resources to the research that goes into developing medicines?'

In the fourth paragraph, the second sentence should read: 'For example, it is argued that patents promote innovation by guaranteeing that the incentive innovators have to do research (i.e. profit) is protected, and by enabling innovators to share their knowledge so that others can build on their discoveries or inventions upon payment.'