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Commentary

Medical congresses at the click of a mouse

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Are we witnessing a new format for medical congresses? Is the road for virtual congresses a no-return one for the real show? Due to Covid-19 pandemic, medical congresses have been postponed, cancelled, or most frequently, transformed in a virtual show. It looks like a tragedy for the medical associations involved, especially the large ones, used to organise annual meetings for thousands of attendees. Providers are now testing a two–three day virtual experience featuring lectures and including even the most popular ten-minute oral presentations to keep registered participants interacting with the event. Poster sessions are also available. With digital presentations, lectures and other events can be fully or partly replicated online, representing in fact an additional chance for those who could not attend the real event. By arranging a digital edition, organisers can expect large number of participants to attend the congress, and for those who cannot travel because of other commitments or funding restrictions, the opportunity to be updated is guaranteed. Apparently it all looks good. As many already believe, will 2020 be the year of no return, alias, will webinar presentations forcedly become a standard format for medical gathering?

What about other sectors in medicine? At medical schools teachers had to change the teaching mode with virtual lectures being the only possible form of interaction with students. Are we witnessing a future change in the teaching format? Are ‘signature platforms’ becoming progressively a premier opportunity for learning? This novel experience has raised a wide debate among teachers [1] and it looks like it may be promoted after Covid-10 restrictions are lifted. Finally, what about telemedicine? For sure it is going to increase as a significant practice for taking care of patients even after COVID-19 pandemic [2].

However, for medical congresses, technology aside, the human factor still remains a binding and unmissable condition. Medical congresses are not just about gathering doctors to listen to lectures. What really makes the difference is the human interaction away from the lecture theatres: meetings between doctors and Key Opinion Leaders where novel concepts and emerging ideas can be discussed informally over a cup of coffee. Face-to-face meetings and evening events with the pharma companies have always represented a unique occasion with mutual benefits for both sides. But if congresses continue the virtual format, the challenging experience of meeting new people who may become collaborators or friends will be missed.

Conversely, Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on scientific society meetings, becoming more global, innovative and inclusive. Through their virtual format, many meetings have increased engagement and global reach, with a higher number of registrations and participants from many more countries than in the past. Technology here is having a major role and more recently virtual meetings may include moving around the congress area, i.e. going to selected rooms, pharma booths and even lounges to chat with friends you may meet over there. This peak of unexpected global engagement is an achievement that scientific societies should value with supplemental offerings beyond the meeting. Nevertheless, financial restrictions from pharmaceutical companies and loss of private donations many Scientific Societies are striving to keep their usual activities for their members. To
maintain the increased opportunities of virtual educational and engagement even further to the annual meetings, pharmaceutical companies should pledge to paying meetings registration fees at least for society members. This will help contributing the scientific knowledge global outreach to maintain membership prices and to keep offering enhanced membership benefits. Overall, medical education will be promoted reaching a larger audience at minimal cost.

Finally, demand for business air travel has been decimated by 95% by Covid-19. Aviation industry has been severely hit with losses in 2020 projected at US$ 84bn and the most confident forecasts do not expect international air traffic returning to 2019 levels until 2024. These figures appear optimistic given that recovery is a guessing game based around vaccines which will become eventually a “passport like” for travelling. With the effects of pandemic lasting longer than expected, international travel remains banned in most places, thus limiting further congress gathering.

Future is unpredictable, more than ever. A most difficult question to answer is when travel restrictions between countries will be lifted. It is without doubts that limitations on overseas travel may be needed to prevent novel outbreaks. “Restricted international travel would be the trade-off for greater freedom at home with a hierarchy of needs when we open up and with foreign mobility be the last one to be re-introduced” (Professor D. Sridhar, Edinburgh University).

It looks like societies will have to live with Covid-19 for long, so our current status of virtual congresses especially the international and world series will remain for long. For the time being, stay safe and enjoy the virtual congresses we are already experiencing and that will continue most probably for a large part of 2021.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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