

Scientific Conferences: Should we go all virtual?

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COVID -19 pandemic led to a rapid transition in human adaptation. Teaching and learning have transformed from a physical mode to a virtual mode. In this situation, the Pakistan Society of Haematology (PSH) decided to hold its Haemcon in virtual mode. President PSH and Chairperson of the Scientific Committee with the cooperation of their team and haematologists put-in all the efforts to accomplish this enormous task in a perfect manner, since it was the first ever experience of holding international virtual conference by any professional society in Pakistan. Their persistent efforts had a fruition by holding multiple sessions involving haematologists across the country. International speakers also contributed, by sharing new updates and by presenting research papers. The whole content is now available online. After taking the stock of it, it can easily be claimed that this alignment by PSH from physical to virtual platform is well thought and was executed seamlessly. Hopefully it will go a long way, in ensuring continuous professional development and education for all in the wake of continuous covid 19 pandemic.

For virtual sessions it hold true that they can be for anybody, anywhere in the world, as long as they have an internet connection. One can listen to these live, but can also be listened later on, as content is uploaded on YouTube. This more visibility is leading to availability of quality content, as one cannot afford the risk of having lesser viewers and more dislikes. Virtual mode allows people with conflicting schedules, living in different time zones or non-availability due to personal commitments, to benefit equally. Different features of virtual activities make these more egalitarian, inclusive and environmentally friendly (less carbon foot prints), than in-person seminars or conferences. Audience can be very large, which makes virtual events more inclusive.

By removing barriers, virtual conferences make it easy to, to access knowledge regardless of financial status, family obligations, sexual inequalities or geographical locations. Going virtual have removed the obstacles of diplomatic and travelling restrictions, finances, being absent from the work place and many more. Surveys revealed that majority of the professionals think that scientific meetings should continue to be virtual or have a significant virtual component, even after the pandemic.

The disadvantages of physical sessions are the high cost, enormous cumulative time invested by the delegates, a large carbon foot print and risk of disease transmission in the wake of ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. With virtual activities, carbon footprints originating from travel witnessed a substantial decline. In USA it is calculated that even if 50% of weekly seminars went virtual, that would save around 30 tons of emission. Organizers of two fully virtual conferences in USA estimated that their total carbon emissions were less than one percent of a traditional physical or fly-in event. Over the time fun, flair and food is on the higher side in the conferences. In virtual happenings all this is curtailed to a larger extent. Physical events are much more resource intensive. They tend to include enormous showbiz style social events.

Virtual conferences can be made more productive by having shorter symposiums sessions over the span of extended days, rather than packed into a small time span. Virtual conferences witness more democratic question and answer sessions, as contrast to in-person events where few people dominate. The wider discussion can be generated by creating #hashtags on twitter with specific themes or topics. The Twitter discussions allow asynchronous questions and answers, which benefit attendees from different time zones, and provide a permanent record.

During the past two decades Pakistan has seen around 70% female representation among health professionals. This has made physical attendance and travel a bit challenging for some professional and the virtual CME activities are well poised to cater for this tier.

Being virtual is very much in fashion, but it is required to address the issues of accessibility, zone-time differences, technological training and glitches, internet bandwidth issues, regulations and standard operative procedures still not time tested, digital burn out and many others. The initial enthusiasm may lead to "zoom-exhaustion", which is already being reported. Less research papers submission has been documented for virtual conferences. How to keep people involved and attentive in virtual milieu is required to be catered for. Virtual conferences don't allow researchers to retreat from their everyday routines and fully immerse themselves in knowledge sharing. Face-to-face interactions and developing acquaintances in the corridors and during leisure time during sessions will be missed. Sponsors are likely to lose interest. Trouble shootings are not so infrequent and there is requirement to make sure throughout the activity that the remote attendees are on line.

A plausible solution lies in being able to organize purposeful, carefully planned, environmentally sustainable and financially conservative hybrid event, having physical and virtual components. To be stand still is against human and intellectual advancement. Knowledge and practice always need to be underpinned by the technology of the day. So to serve and survive, we are required to keep pruning, expanding and refining the skills.

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