

Virtual Meetings during COVID-19 Pandemic: Is it time to say Goodbye to Physical Meetings?

Sir,

Academic conferences are considered the best way for medical professionals to share their experiences, disseminate new ideas, and set new evidence-based professional guidelines.¹ These meetings are historically conducted in person, and provide a tangible platform to improve professional skills through workshops, and oral and poster presentations. Apart from these invaluable advantages of physical academic meetings, we must not ignore their disadvantages. From the perspective of a busy and well-engaged practitioner, a conference means taking leaves from work, time, cost and exertion associated with trips and some unpredictable factors, like illness, etc. Looking at these conferences and symposia from the outlook of an organiser, such meetings are very important in the highly competitive pharmaceutical and medical equipment business. Furthermore, such academic proceedings are also very demanding in terms of a good venue, availability of well-known key-note speakers, good scholastic content and compliance to ethical and legal norms.² So in order to assemble such a sizeable number of regular and new participants, these meetings should hold outstanding and comprehensive talks, meaningful interactions and some post-meeting entertainments to make it an up-to-date and memorable experience within a certain budget.

COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019 caught the attention of the world due to its high contagiousness and mortality.³ In March 2020, after reports of massive casualties in various parts of world like the USA and Europe, World Health Organization declared it a pandemic. Since then, COVID-19 has inundated various parts of the world affecting nearly every individual and community with significant modifications in everyday life. To impede the spread of COVID-19 virus, certain measures have been implemented, like wearing mask, use of sanitizer, personal protective equipment (PPE), social distancing and quarantine. Since 2020, these protective measures have certainly changed the dynamics of every walk of life around the world.

These COVID-19-related protective steps have also had major consequences on continuous medical education (CME) of the medical professionals. Due to social distancing, inter/intra-countries lockdowns, and flight restrictions, many planned meetings had to be either cancelled, postponed, or rearranged as virtual meetings. As of today, virtual meetings have become the predominant mode of dissemination of knowledge, sharing experience among researchers, and facilitating professional

developments. These virtual meetings are being organised as webinars and hybrid meetings, using digital platforms like Microsoft teams®, Zoom® and GoToWebinar®, etc.⁴

In COVID-19 pandemic, these online professional meetings have been found safe and inhibited the spread of highly contagious COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, these virtual meetings have humongous benefits for attendees, like avoiding travel hassle and saving money and precious time. Similarly, for organisers these virtual meetings save huge money needed to engage venue for physical meetings, food and other social activities.⁵ Presenters develop videos of their talk or posters, which are made available to participants at the beginning of the conference to view in any part of the world. Some organisers have used GatherTown® or Zoom® to create a virtual series of pubs that were open 24 hours/day for participants to meet and video chat or even conduct social events virtually.⁴

As the uncertainty of coronavirus continues, virtual conferences should be embraced; and the conference organisers must explore and design strategies to enhance dissemination with an objective to discover new platforms. Such platforms should provide optimal interaction among participants, organisers and speakers, replicating the sense of collaboration and socialisation that a participant would normally get in a physical event. Virtual academic events are more reasonable, accessible, and financially sustainable. We foresee the possibility of fully virtual conferences becoming the primary source of knowledge dissemination by avoiding dissemination of COVID-19 virus. In this regard, a smart mobile phone becomes equally essential and important like stethoscope in a healthcare's professional life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION:

MUZ: Concept, drafting, final approval.

NF: Literature search, drafting, final approval.

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