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Editorial

Conferences: What for?

The *WN* editorial team, the Association Council, and many Association members, will be participating in the World Congress of Public Health Nutrition in Porto, Portugal, this month. Some of us will be speaking, the Association is involved as a supporter of the congress, and we have a session to which all congress delegates are invited. Please check the final programme, and we look forward to seeing many of you there!

This editorial is not about the Porto congress. Of course, it could not be. It hasn't happened yet! Written in the month of Porto 2010, it is about nutrition conferences in general. What are they for? (The same question applies to conferences on other topics).

We suggest that now is a good time to ask the question. After all, physical travel is becoming more expensive and problematic. Electronic meetings are becoming more sophisticated. International conferences are unbalanced if only because they are bound to exclude all but a few delegates from low-income countries in other continents. On-line journals like *WN*, and websites like that of the Association, include immediate response and debate facilities. Employers are increasingly reluctant

to stomp up the escalating costs of registration and accommodation, on top of that of travel. Email and skype are virtually free, and enable increasingly sophisticated networking.

So what is the added value of conferences? Or in other words, is their value sufficient to justify the enormous effort needed to organise them, much of which is voluntary work? This no doubt is a question that has crossed the minds of Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida, Lluís Serra-Majem, Noel Solomons, Ibrahim Elmadfa, and all their many active colleagues on the Porto committees, who have worked so hard to make this month's congress a success in every respect. We salute them – and please see this month's Association website home page at www.wphna.org for much good news about Porto 2010.

Three well-justified or at least defensible reasons for conferences, well-known to all presenters and delegates, are not in any usual sense scientific. These can be classified as fun, commerce, and business. These may well be the main reasons why most people attend and participate in conferences.

Fun reasons

Venues of international conferences are usually nice and sometimes glamorous places. There is of course nothing wrong with this. Enjoyment of ambience is a good reason to participate in conferences. This takes different forms. Some participants who have their registration and their own travel, accommodation and extras paid for, sensibly come with their partners, and achieve a half-price break before or after the conference. True, they may also take some time out while the conference is on. Absence is most noticeable, whether or not partners are involved, when the venue is convenient for shopping or scuba-diving, golf or gourmandising, museums or monuments...

...Or simply for catching some rays. On one memorable sunny day during a gigantic American Heart Association held in Clearwater, Florida, long ago, the presiding chairman of a hall full of conscientious national delegates invited the distinguished guests, a planeload of Brits – mostly journalists, it should be said – who had scored freebies from an interested transnational food manufacturer, to stand up and be welcomed. One person rose to his feet, paused, looked around, paused, grasped the situation, and said: 'They're on the beach'. For other participants the alternative term 'congress' is apt. The English academic David Lodge has written a series of novels on this topic, and nobody has gainsaid him (1).

Conferences are also often social occasions for participants whose abstracts are accepted, later to be quasi-published as sort-of part of *The Literature* in a fat book. Such participants, when they have summarised their work on a poster, often get the

costs of their registration, travel, accommodation and incidentals paid by their institution. Registration revenue supplies the 'bread and butter' income of conferences. On the first and last days of conferences, such delegates are to be seen with their rolled up posters in tubes slung on their backs, like hunting rifles. The posters are displayed in silent halls sometimes known as 'the tombs', with perhaps one in 10 or 30 attended at any one time. Most of the time almost all the authors at the conference are enjoying gossips with their colleagues, on the town, trawling for the goodies on offer in the exhibition halls, or seeking employment. They of course may also be attending the scientific presentations.

Commercial reasons

Most conferences now also have a trade fair aspect. It is almost impossible to imagine a nutrition conference without a conspicuous industry presence. The scale of Big Food and Big Drink support for nutrition conferences does however remain modest, compared with that of Big Pharma for medical conferences. It may well be that most conference participants welcome the presence of industry sponsors, who provide colour and glamour. One practical defence is that without industry, nutrition conferences would not be viable, or at best would be drab. This is a reasonable point. As one industry executive once said sharply to a disgruntled participant: 'Get real. Without us, you would not be here'.

At nutrition conferences the main exhibitors are transnational food and drink manufacturers. These include Unilever, Danone, Kellogg's, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, and their foundations, as well as national or specialist firms. Nestlé is generous with its company literature. On occasion it even gives away hardback books of collected papers from its own regular invitation-only annual large workshop meetings. These are held in agreeable places, and are occasions for leading paediatric nutrition scientists to present on a set theme such as nutrition and growth (2) or the quality of artificial formula feeds (3) and to exchange ideas with academic colleagues and with company nutritionists and executives.

At conferences, some firms have spectacular stands, fronted by locally hired lovelies and hunks, kitted out for the occasion in company livery. As well as offering free snacks, and sometimes other goodies like branded bags, pens, pedometers, laser pointers, or memory sticks loaded with company information, commercial stands also may act as recruitment centres. Young nutrition scientists no doubt know that they will probably work for, or be funded by, the food and drink industry at some point in their careers, and stands offering employment opportunities are usually crowded.

Food and industry firms support conferences in more ways than by renting space in the exhibition areas. They also commonly buy pre-conference, breakfast, lunchtime,

evening or other out-of-programme sessions, including receptions, all of which are usually fairly clearly advertised as company promotions, and may be addressed by senior nutrition scientists who often are members of their advisory boards. Free snacks are usually on offer at breakfast and lunch sessions. Soirées at which distinguished scientists are given industry-sponsored lifetime achievement and such-like awards can be splendid affairs. The magnificent Danone buffet feast during the Latin American Nutrition Societies (SLAN) conference in Acapulco in 2003, held in a colonial fort, is still spoken of nostalgically.

How much money does industry contribute to conferences? This is not disclosed. Firms that fund conferences are commonly featured on the programmes as platinum, gold or silver sponsors. Do nutrition conferences need industry funding to survive? Or do conference organisers take money from industry in order to make a well-earned surplus? This is not known. As far as the *WN* editors know, no nutrition conference organiser has ever published income and expenditure accounts. We suggest that this is an omission. .

Industry may donate bursaries to cover the costs of Asian or African delegates. It may also support needy professional organisations. For example, at the International Conference on Nutrition in Durban in 2005, those present at the launch of the Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS) held at a special lunch, were refreshed with cola drinks, soft drinks, and bottled water, all produced and supplied by Coca-Cola, with Coke executives discreetly at hand.

Conference sessions on the main programme are by convention not for sale, but in these difficult times exceptions may be made. Certainly, what seems to be an increasing number of industry executives from research or public affairs departments are invited to present during symposium and round-table sessions. Whether such sessions are purchased, or are reciprocation for general support, or whether invitations to industry people to speak are quite separate from their role as sponsors, is usually not known.

These sessions may address topics such as private-public partnerships, or the contribution of the various stakeholders including the private sector to public health. Many delegates may well feel that such sessions should be seen as a valuable part of conferences. Academic speakers at such sessions may be funded by industry, as are a large proportion of research scientists directly, or indirectly through working for institutions or departments endowed by industry. Such sessions are of increased interest now that public funds for research are being slashed, most of all in countries like the UK and elsewhere in Europe whose economies are particularly fragile (4,5). Besides, the careers of research students now typically depend on their ability to raise funds from industry.

Business reasons

Many of the most senior people at conferences attend few sessions, apart from those at which they and members of their teams are presenting. They are typically very busy people, and conferences are occasions to do business, a core reason for most forms of international meeting.

Conferences are also a visible sign of career development. Papers published prolifically in increasingly high-impact peer-reviewed journals are the long tall ladders to academic promotion. The climbs from poster co-author to workshop participant to symposium presenter or round-table discussant, to plenary keynote lecturer, are also steps to status. The relationship between prominence of presentations and quality of the material presented is, as every conference delegate knows, variable.

Research and its publication is the main business of academic scientists. Investigators in receipt of or seeking major research funding, arrange team meetings on the occasion of conferences, to develop grant applications, check preliminary results, recruit new team members, or to chat up foundation executives or journal editors. Conferences also have a 'beauty contest' aspect. International public and private sector executives act as talent scouts, using them to check and sound out potential members of their advisory bodies and expert panels.

Business at conferences is also done by professional bodies. Obvious examples in our field are the congresses held in association with the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, and also the African, Asian, Latin American and European regional equivalents, which are the occasions for member-only IUNS and regional meetings. Our own Association is holding its own business meeting on the occasion of the Porto congress this month. All this is right and proper.

The beef about the beef

So what about the scientific programmes of conferences? None of what's said so far implies that the sessions that run parallel with the commercial exhibitions and shopping and other expeditions, and between pre-congress meetings, and the daily breakfasts, lunches, receptions, gala dinners, private meetings, and so forth, are incidental. To suggest so would be unkind, unfair, and untrue. The scientific content of conferences is central and crucial – or should be.

More often than not, though, for most people at conferences, their fun, commercial and business aspects may well be more interesting and attractive than the programmes themselves. Is this a criticism of the scientific content of conferences? Again, there is room for more than one view.

Here though are some of the concerns that are regularly voiced about nutrition conferences held in the past. We think these concerns are reasonable and need to be addressed. To repeat, these points do not and cannot apply to this month's Porto congress. Also, some concern nutrition science generally, not just conferences.

Nutritionism. Nutrition conferences tend to feature the chemical constituents of food (6). It is as if architecture conferences keynoted topics like the stress limits of plate-glass cladding of 100+ storey buildings, or the incidence of vectors of Lyme disease in Wisconsin air-conditioning systems. This point applies more to general nutrition conferences, much less to those concerned with public health nutrition.

Insiderism. Conference organisers sensibly appoint scientific committees. These include illustrious or influential people known to and trusted by them, often members of previous organising committees. Committee members who propose themselves as speakers are often accepted. But this prudent process can result in conferences featuring self-perpetuated international speakers.

Ceremonialism. This may be to commercial sponsors, or to important bodies such as UN agencies, whose senior executives may be invited to give talks that say little that cannot be read. On one memorable occasion, the opening ceremony of an INCAP congress included a band playing the national anthems of all central American countries. Ceremonial aspects of conferences are often best skipped.

Newism. Programmes may bear general labels like 'New Perspectives and Challenges', 'From Global to Omics, New Approaches', or 'Sustainable Solutions in a New Century'. These may indicate that the organisers have not constructed a programme with a focused theme or with any planned concrete outcome. Some will say that conferences should have something for everybody and not be focused.

Tokenism. Before publication became the key professional career path, public and professional meetings were the occasion for the announcement of new ideas and new findings. This is now not often the case. For legal and professional reasons, the most that can be expected on any crucial topic at a conference, is a summary of what has already been published, within an overall review.

Podiumism. Most conference sessions are labelled with names like 'symposium', 'round-table', or workshop'. But invited presenters at such sessions so often go to the lectern, present their lecture, almost always over-run, and so leave little if any time for meaningful discussion. Of all the concerns touched on here, this is one that obviously should and can easily be put right

Future directions

Given all this, do or can conferences advance the science of public health nutrition? Yes, of course they can. The purpose of conferences as agreeable meetings is clear. Their declared purpose, to be crucial occasions at which science is advanced, is perhaps not so clear. We look forward to the Porto congress this month, and its insights. Next month our editorial will outline new ways for conferences to be devised and organised – but perhaps such thoughts of ‘future directions’ will only be an example of ‘new-ism’!

The editors

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