
MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Organising a medical conference

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Organising a medical conference is an extremely challenging task. Viewed from the outside, it is easy to underestimate the amount of work required to assemble even a short programme. Indeed, the more smoothly things run, the more work has undoubtedly gone into it. Human nature is such that potential organisers never believe any of this until it happens to them!

The first and most important step is to speak to previous organisers and take careful note of what they have to say. They may advise you to reconsider offering to organise the meeting, but it will probably be too late. Consider each aspect of the conference in turn.

Conference structure

Conferences vary considerably in length, size, and style. Plan the structure of the meeting according to exactly what it is you wish to achieve. Ideally, aim to combine education and exposure to new ideas with entertainment. The audience's interest will be most easily maintained if there is variety in both the content and presentation. This may involve mixing together invited lectures, free papers, posters, and interactive sessions (for example, small group seminars). Often there will be a precedent to follow, where a predetermined conference structure is expected by everyone, thus rendering it relatively inflexible.

Assistance in advance of the meeting

It would be unrealistic (and rather foolish) to expect to be able to organise any conference single handedly. Accept the fact that help will be required and arrange it an early stage, the extent depending upon the size and type of meeting. If you are planning an international conference with hundreds of delegates and a grand social programme, it is worth considering employing the services of a professional specialist agency. Cost considerations, however, may preclude this.

Most conferences can be organised by clinicians, with the help of secretaries, colleagues, and spouses. Good secretarial assistance is crucial in order that notices advertising the meeting and calling for abstracts are sent out well in advance. These notices should prominently display a daytime telephone and fax number where inquiries may be answered. Your secretarial helper is responsible for regular liaison with the conference venue and caterers, and arranging for professional printers to produce programmes, badges, receipts,

continuous medical education forms, and dinner tickets. Some of this material (together with a map of how to find the venue) will need to be sent out to delegates as soon as bookings are taken. Other material, including the final programme and lists of delegates and supporting trade exhibitors, needs to be included in the "delegate pack" provided on the day.

Venue

An appropriate venue is critical to the success of any meeting. The most important factor is whether the lecture hall and seminar rooms will satisfy the scientific requirements. Other considerations are cost, ease of access (including parking), accommodation, dining room, and bar facilities.

Once you have checked the capacity, carefully inspect the lecture theatre and ask to test the slide projection, lighting, and acoustics. Do not be deterred by the inevitable irritation that this provokes, but ask to see the areas proposed to house poster presentations, demonstrations, trade exhibitions, and refreshments. Find out whether or not the venue will be hosting other functions at the same time: if so, establish their nature and how noisy they are likely to be. Ascertain what help will be provided by the venue on the day. Usually, the reception team will comprise yourself and several assistants/colleagues. The venue is unlikely to provide a projectionist, so inquire which professional projectionist is familiar with the facilities. It is never worth cutting corners here—a friendly but incompetent amateur projectionist has enormous potential to destroy a meeting.

Accommodation

Most delegates who have travelled any distance to a conference require accommodation. The nightmare of becoming embroiled in arranging this is not something to undertake lightly, especially considering the fact that most delegates only book at the last minute. As organiser, the best approach is to visit several local hotels to obtain special rates, then send a list out to delegates so that they can make appropriate bookings themselves. However, do not be fooled into believing that this will free you from problems with accommodation. Inevitably, some delegates will always simply turn up on the day having booked neither accommodation nor for the conference, conveying to you in imperious fashion their expectation that you arrange it for them!

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Table 1 Checklist of materials at the reception desk

(1) A list of delegates, highlighting those who have not yet paid	(7) Continuous Medical Education forms
(2) Delegate "packs" containing:	(8) Relevant telephone numbers
Blank pad of paper for notes	(9) A telephone and directory
Conference programme	(10) Bus/train/coach/airport timetables
Map of conference centre	(11) Change for parking meters and telephones
List of delegates	(12) list of sponsors
Meal and dinner tickets	(13) Access to a fax machine
List of sponsors	(14) Spare laser pointer
Other advertising material	(15) Pair of artery forceps (ideal for jammed slides)
(3) Spare delegate packs	(16) Spare Velcro dots
(4) Receipts for delegates	(17) Loud bell or gong
(5) Plan of conference centre	(18) Supply of mints to help keep everyone cool
(6) Noticeboard with dinner seating plan and other messages	

If you do decide to reserve a block booking for accommodation for all delegates, it will ideally be at the conference venue. Special rates should be easy to obtain. Obtain written confirmation of these rates, the numbers of rooms available, and the deadline for bookings.

Costs and sponsorship

Try to estimate income and expenditure, so that an appropriate conference fee can be fixed. Income comprises the delegates' conference fees and any sponsorship from companies. Expenditure includes: hiring the venue, accommodation, refreshments (including any conference dinner), hiring the projectionist, producing title slides, purchasing paper, envelopes, stamps, prizes, and Velcro "dots", printing letters, programmes, dinner tickets and badges, and paying fees for invited speakers and other professional helpers. Aim to set the conference fee at approximately the same level as previous conferences. Remember that in times of decreasing study leave funding, many delegates may be paying out of their own pockets and would therefore think twice if the fee is set too high.

It is often possible to obtain sponsorship from companies to cover much of the conference cost. Measure the area allocated for the trade exhibition at the venue, then produce a plan with marked places to send with a request to potential sponsors. When sponsors confirm their bookings, allocate them specific places on a first come, first served basis and determine their requirements (tables, power points, and so on).

Scientific programme and chairs

Given the problems encountered organising the other aspects of the conference, it is easy to lose sight of its main purpose. Ensure that the structure of the scientific programme is varied and interesting.

The chair for each session holds the key to its success. This individual does not need to be

tremendously academic, unless introducing a very distinguished series of speakers. It is more important to use a colleague who can be trusted to turn up, keep questions to the point, and prevent the meeting from running late. Although you may feel obliged to chair one or more sessions, it may actually be better to restrict yourself to reading out occasional "house notices" as necessary. This will enable you to remain free to deal with any general difficulties which arise, as described below.

It is a nice touch to produce some conference "title" slides, adorned with a suitable logo, to show before and after each lecture. Unfortunately, these seem to become a collector's item among some of the speakers, so ensure that there are plenty of copies!

Invited speakers

Lectures from invited speakers are an integral part of most conferences. They make the meeting attractive to potential delegates and are a reliable way of both imparting knowledge and entertaining the audience. Guest lectures usually involve little risk as far as the organiser is concerned, but do be very careful who you invite. A small proportion of well known "experts" are notorious for not actually turning up. It is easy to find out from previous conference organisers who they are. Avoid them—you have been warned! These unscrupulous individuals may be double or even triple booked: if your meeting happens to be the least prestigious you will suffer. This particularly applies to meetings organised by trainees. The record for non-attendance is held by one recent national trainees' meeting which suffered the indignity of three invited speakers failing to attend on the same day. Keeping this caveat in mind, there are several different ways to approach arranging these sessions. Perhaps the best is to allow several speakers to speak sequentially on a theme and then bring them together as an expert panel for discussion and questions at the end. This can be particularly

Table 2 Typical problems to anticipate on the day

Problem	Solution
Delegates arrive, but did not book	Expect them: have spare places available
Speaker fails to turn up	Arrange in advance for a local person to act as a standby with a prepared presentation
Chairman fails to turn up	Most unlikely if a careful choice was made. Chair the session yourself
Late arriving delegates disrupt lectures	Physically block the front entrance to the lecture hall and redirect latecomers to the rear entrance
Slide projector fails	Have a spare projector and replacement bulb
Laser pointer fails	Carry a spare one
Lecturer inaudible at back of hall	Arrange for a sensible colleague to sit at the back to ask the lecturer to speak up if this happens
Lectures run late	Avoid this by priming the chairman in advance to keep to time
Refreshment breaks run late	Terminate delegates' conversations at the end of each break by a very loud noise (for example a gong)
Refreshments are inadequate	Keep a low profile, since you are likely to be very unpopular

entertaining if members of the panel hold opposing views, but check first that each speaker is happy to engage in such a debate.

Remember that the expenses of the invited speakers will need to be covered by the conference. It is also usual to provide an honorarium or gift. Take these costs into consideration when planning your budget.

Free papers

Free paper sessions are often considered to be the most interesting and vibrant part of any conference. Decide if you wish to restrict the free papers to particular themes and make this clear in the call for abstracts. Optimise your choice of presentations by sending out at least two calls for abstracts as widely as possible, leaving the closing date as late as you can reasonably cope with. Request structured abstracts with limited length (typically 300 words) divided into: title, authors with the name of the presenter underlined, institution, aim, methods, results, and conclusions. This is particularly important if the abstracts are to be published in a journal. If you plan to allow poster displays, use the same abstract form, but ensure that there is a large clear box for would-be presenters to tick to demonstrate their preference for oral or poster presentation. Assemble a small team to mark each abstract and decide which are worthy of presentation. Ensure that the judges are blinded to the authors and institutions involved.

Sometimes there will be insufficient suitable material to fill the proposed programme. In this situation, do not be tempted to compromise on quality—it is better to reduce the length of the programme than to fill it with material of dubious merit. Similarly, do not be tempted to help fill the programme with one of your own papers, since cries of nepotism will undoubtedly follow.

Inform those chosen to present as soon as possible, making it clear exactly how long they will have (for example, 12 minutes maximum, then three minutes for questions). Ask them to write to confirm exactly which media they require (single/dual slide presentation, video, overheads, and so on). If there is to be a prize for the best free paper, assemble your judging panel well in advance. Remember also to obtain the prize and identify a suitable time for it to be presented.

Small group sessions

Discussion groups, tutorials, seminars, and practical sessions can add much needed variety, particularly at the end of a long day. However, it is often rather difficult to predict exactly how these sessions will turn out. Previous experience indicates that success depends largely upon the charisma of the person leading the group, so choose wisely. Sometimes a lively discussion group is aided by an informal setting, such as the bar, where otherwise reserved individuals will feel comfortable to participate and argue vociferously.

Posters

Provided that the venue has space and appropriate display boards, the decision as to whether or not to include poster presentations at your conference is a personal one. Certainly, a good collection of colourful posters adds an extra dimension to the conference hall. On the other hand, poor quality presentations of poor quality research have the opposite effect. Unfortunately, once you accept an abstract, you have no control over what is displayed. However, it is worth remembering that presenting a poster may be the only way that a trainee can obtain study leave to attend the meeting. Thus by offering poster presentations you may be encouraging researchers of the future.

If you do accept posters, check which size and type (for example, Velcro) of poster boards are used at the venue. Specify the exact size limit to those presenting (for example, maximum width = 100 cm; maximum height = 75 cm) and purchase appropriate fixatives. Velcro boards are the most common type currently in use; since many posters come in several pieces, allow for this when deciding how many Velcro “dots” to buy.

It is traditional to judge the posters and award a prize for the best one. Finding a suitable person to do the judging is usually fairly easy, particularly if a small incentive is offered! The practice of combining poster presentations with short oral presentations, each lasting one or two minutes, has recently become widespread. Apart from offering excellent entertainment, this gimmick adds little to the science of the meeting and can be a little demeaning.

Refreshments and conference dinner

Food and drink between sessions will either be provided by the venue or by outside caterers. When choosing outside caterers, take advice from previous conference organisers and use a company that is familiar with the venue. Check how much flexibility there is regarding final numbers and late additions. If there is likely to be significant sponsorship, it is wise to have a stand up buffet, rather than a sit down lunch, in order to allow delegates to mix among the trade exhibitions.

Organising a conference dinner can be as difficult as sorting out the scientific programme. Decide the format (for example, black tie, sherry reception, dinner, after dinner speeches, and drinks) and liaise closely with the caterers. Provide an alternative menu for vegetarians and consider whether it will be necessary to apply for a late licence for the bar. Avoid becoming entangled in inevitable arguments over the seating arrangements by asking delegates to sign their names up on a seating plan displayed during the conference. Choose the after dinner speakers carefully and prime them as to the appropriate tone to adopt. Some conferences have toyed with the idea of an after dinner debate on a contentious medical issue relating to the theme of the conference. However, the combination of alcohol and lack

of control over such a debate causes most organisers to shudder quietly.

Social programme

For most meetings, it is unnecessary to arrange an extravagant social programme: a conference dinner will suffice. However, delegates attending large international meetings may have different expectations. In this case, contact the local tourist board for advice and look for a suitable colleague who will relish organising this part of the conference (every region has one!). There is plenty of opportunity for innovation within the social programme. Trying to combine education with exposure to culture can be very challenging. For example, it might be possible to arrange a visit to a local famous sports stadium to inspect the medical facilities and watch an event.

The week before

Just before the meeting check that all invited speakers and chairpersons are fully prepared. Visit the venue and arrange an early access time for you and the trade exhibitors to set up. Contact the projectionist and caterers in order to finalise arrangements and numbers. Check that the conference pack to be given to each delegate is complete.

On the day

Arrive early, greet the trade exhibitors, set up the reception desk and noticeboard, then check the equipment. Arrange for plenty of assistants to join you on the reception desk—you will certainly need them! Make sure that you have

everything available at the reception desk that might be needed (table 1). Aim to leave yourself free to deal with unforeseen problems and to meet your speakers and chairs. Introduce both to the projectionist and demonstrate the equipment. Provide the chairs with a few short notes on each speaker, in order to aid their introductions. It is also worth priming them about any particular problems or conflicts (for example, between a speaker and a delegate) which you might anticipate.

Despite careful planning, problems are inevitable. These will need to be addressed continuously throughout the day, so resign yourself to the fact that you will probably miss most of the presentations. Many of the problems which arise are predictable and have simple solutions (table 2).

Afterwards

The immediate aftermath of a large conference is inevitably frenetic, coping with delegates who have lost bags, forgotten handbags, and not paid their bills. Once these problems are resolved, a few final tasks remain. These include writing to thank the sponsors and invited speakers, settling all outstanding bills, and providing a final account.

At this stage it is quite natural for organisers to feel slightly deflated. However, if the meeting proceeded smoothly, such emotions may be overwhelmed by a massive sense of relief. In either case, it is a good time to allow yourself that holiday that you had to postpone because of commitments organising the conference.