

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Should Scientific Quality of a National Conference Be Measured by the Percentage of Abstracts That Are Published?

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To the Editor:

We have read with interest the article published recently by M.P. García-Muret and R.M. Pujol on the “Assessment of Scientific Impact of Communications Presented at Spanish National Dermatology and Venereology Congresses,”¹ which stated that a high percentage of communications at Spanish dermatology congresses go unpublished. The authors make a telling analysis of the reasons why these communications do not see the light of day and, furthermore, claim that it would increase the scientific impact of the congress if more of them were finally published.

Although we would agree with the analysis and conclusions of the authors, the article has generated a certain amount of comment among specialists in our department. We believe is appropriate to reflect these comments here as they probably represent the opinion of many dermatologists.

Currently, it is believed that publication of communications at congresses is a good marker of their scientific impact, an affirmation backed up by several studies^{2,3}; however, as we understand it, the truly controversial point is whether all communications presented in congresses should be published,⁴ and whether this is an essential measure of their scientific quality.

The medical conference is the oldest form of medical-social communication, and the main aim is the continued education of qualified specialists and those in training. However, we should remember that national congresses have other objectives such as:

1. “Live” dissemination and exchange of knowledge. The congress itself is a magnificent forum for disseminating information, given the profusion of fresh ideas that intermingle dynamically, providing the possibility for verbal discourse and discussion.
2. Teaching function. The congress is an educational stage for the entire professional body and, particularly, for physicians in training. For resident dermatologists (the so-called MIR in Spain), this is an extraordinary opportunity for them to take their first steps in the world of scientific communication. It is training ground in which many beginners—with much excitement—present and debate their posters and communications.

Although these may not yield a publication in the short or medium term, some may be the seeds from which a more extensive body of work will emerge years later.

3. Creative function and a stimulus to professional development. The congress is a true whirlwind of ideas, both from the scientific and professional standpoint. In congresses, ideas are born and multiply countless times.
4. Psychological motivation. Normally, after a congress, the delegates return with a spring in their step and their self-esteem reinforced. Everybody is able to “recharge themselves” sufficiently to keep moving forward.
5. Social function. The congress is a meeting place where delegates interact and exchange opinions on a range of topics, share professional, work-related, or teaching experiences, and where the past, present, and future of dermatology converge.

In addition, we should remember that the interests of the delegates are very diverse, and the congress should try to accommodate one and all; thus, for example, residents in training can learn from well-presented and well-documented isolated case reports which may make less of an impact on their more senior colleagues. Dermatologists dedicated to research in a specific area will be more interested in multicenter trials in the field in which they specialize, whereas dermatologists in a private practice will be more attracted by reports of new diagnostic and therapeutic techniques. Each one of these forums has its followers within the congress, some more so than others, and often the most widely accepted ones are not those that will have highest impact in terms of scientific publication.

Each congress should establish its own guidelines for improving quality, but if in so doing, the acceptance of certain submissions is restricted, it may run the risk of not meeting the other functions that we believe form part of a congress. Changes in norms and customs should be undertaken with caution, not forgetting that scientific congresses are the main source of income for scientific societies and that earnings will depend on the number of people who attend and on commercial interest. When any attempt to change the focus of a congress affects delegates directly or indirectly, such changes should be assessed not only by scientific committees but also by economic managers.

No doubt it would be desirable that dermatologists make every effort to get their communications published. As Chesterton wrote 100 years ago: "If the idea does not seek to be the word, the chances are that it is an evil idea. If the word is not made flesh it is a bad word." The idea converted into "word" is scientific communication and the word made "flesh" is the act of publishing. However, it is not that simple. Scientific publication is a reserved space, subject to many difficulties and to a different context than a congress and other forums of scientific knowledge and medical communication such as the web pages, refresher courses, databases, and meetings of working groups. Each one has its function and they are not comparable.⁵

In conclusion, we believe that it is very important not to confuse these types of scientific forum. While they may all be related to a certain extent, they should not be mixed. After all, not all scientific knowledge needs to be published.

References

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Response

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To the Editor:

We welcome the comments, suggestions, and contributions of Dr. Belloch-Mas concerning our article "Assessment of Scientific Impact of Communications Presented at Spanish National Dermatology and Venereology Congresses from 2000 Through 2003" published recently in this journal.

And we concede that, in the design of the study, we encountered many of the points that Dr. Betlloch-Mas has raised in her letter. Obviously, within the aims of all Spanish dermatology congresses, a fundamental aspect should be the provision of continued training, both for practicing specialists and those in training. We fully agree that a Spanish congress should include, within its objectives, the dissemination and exchange of knowledge, facilitate learning and the initiation of scientists in the communication of their ideas, act as a meeting point for participants, and help stimulate better daily health care and research activities. Likewise, interaction between delegates should be promoted and the congress should be a forum for sharing personal, occupational, scientific, and teaching experiences.

We believe that the current structure and different activities in national dermatology congresses (symposia, workshops, pre-congress courses, official topics, meetings of different working parties, social activities, etc), allow these goals to be reached without too much difficulty. As Dr. Betlloch-Mas points out, there is no single final end user of a national dermatology congress; rather the congress should be structured to cater to the expectations and hopes of a heterogeneous group that includes both dermatology specialists and physicians in training (with different professional practices, priorities, and interests).

However, the essential objective of our study was to assess, in as objective a manner as possible, the scientific quality of the different communications presented in the Spanish national dermatology congress over a 4 year period. At the same time, we tried to compare the results obtained with data published previously in the literature concerning national and international congresses. We believe that this variable can be considered to be independent of the others mentioned above (continuous professional development, exchange of ideas, meeting points, etc).