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EUROPE CALLING

Unnoted by the great majority of the general paediatric community, the “5th International Conference on Pediatric ORL” scheduled to be held in Graz, Austria, 9–12 July 2000, has been cancelled. In his letter to those colleagues organising scheduled symposia, the congress chairman, Prof Stammberger, head of the department of head and neck surgery at the University of Graz, bitterly regretted this unforeseen development.

What had happened? Obviously, the current political situation in Austria had resulted in the several international pharmaceutical companies withdrawing their participation in the meeting, shortly after a new government had been elected to include the ultranationalist Jörg Haider’s FPÖ (Liberal Party of Austria). One may argue whether it is politically correct to participate in an international medical convention in a country whose government contains politicians from a party whose leader (Haider himself is not a member of the government) has repeatedly expressed antisemitic and other discriminating statements. However, international medical meetings used to be and are still being held in non-democratic countries (which Austria is

not) with financial support from the pharmaceutical industry and generally without boycott from potential attendees.

It is sad that scientific exchange—that is, the realisation of a long planned European meeting, has to suffer from the admittedly unwelcome political development in Austria. What is of concern is the fact that it was not the scientist’s decision to refrain from participation but that of the sponsors from the pharmaceutical industry, who feared for their international reputation. Today, most national and virtually all large international medical conventions depend on direct (sponsoring of speakers) and indirect (through participation in parallel exhibitions) financial support by industry. Probably, there is little we can do about it and usually this is acceptable as long as the organising committees remain independent. But at least it should be a warning for all future organisers of meetings to be alert when they sign contracts with sponsors.

ULRICH HEININGER
European Associate Editor