CORRESPONDENCE

Poster Exhibitions at National Conferences: Education or Farce?

by Dr. med. Gabriele Salzl, Dr. med. Stefan Gölder, Priv.-Doz. Dr. med. Antje Timmer, Priv.-Doz. Dr. med. Jörg Marienhagen, Prof. Dr. med. Jürgen Schölmerich, Priv.-Doz. Dr. med. Johannes Grossmann in volume 5/2008

Value is Questionable

This article does not live up to the expectations that the chosen title raises in your readers. The study does not use randomization, and it is implied that 1 in 5 conference participants were surveyed. However, 2100 potential „normal“ congress participants submitted only 39 questionnaires ($n = 39$). If every 1 in 5 participants had been surveyed this would correspond to a total number of 195 participants. Further, the authors evaluated only a single, national conference. The sample is arbitrary, and each result that was obtained is of questionable scientific value.

A total of 467 persons (22.2% of 2100 conference participants) presumably attended a poster presentation. According to information provided on page 79, however, 39.4% of the evaluated 39 (!) conference participants attended a poster presentation, or even 46.4% (Discussion section). Interpreting these data in the sense of response behavior with an "orientation on current standards" would also put all other results in perspective. The different numbers of interviews that were evaluated is confusing (86 poster authors in figure 2, 116 in figure 5). Did 30 poster authors not want to comment on the scientific value of their posters? That would indeed speak for itself. The large number of "recycled" posters is worrying. Not even one quarter of 86 poster authors assess the scientific value of posters as high or very high. The poster presentations were attended almost exclusively by the authors and poster chairpersons, and according to the authors, the posters were misconceived in terms of the conference audience. It therefore all seems rather farcical.

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Unrealized Potential

When considering the use and value of poster exhibitions at medical conferences, the author considers it of prime importance to remind readers that a poster is a large, printed image. The main characteristic of a poster is the fact that the scientific subject is instantly conveyed by the image, which does not need an explanation and should be recognizable from a distance of several meters. Means and methods borrowed from the fine arts may be used to achieve this. Further to oral presentations

and published articles, posters may be regarded as a presentational medium of equal value, whose emphasis and associated problems are different. Not every topic lends itself to each presentational format; the originator should therefore always be involved in the decision about which format should be adopted to present his or her subject. Conceptualizing and executing a poster can easily take a comparable amount of time and effort as preparing a presentation or article.

However, at specialist medical conferences, the expressive potential of a high quality poster is used only rarely if at all. Submitted posters at such conferences are mostly text formats upscaled to an A0 size, and they may include one or several figures/graphics/images or tables. Their shortcomings in terms of conveying the message of the chosen topic in a striking enough way are proved by the fact that someone has to explain them in detail during poster presentations that cannot be anything other than boring.

Conveying medical and scientific content and simultaneously using a convincing visual representation is a considerable challenge in this context. This should be fully considered and borne in mind when assessing the quality of posters and giving awards.

Medical congresses could greatly benefit from having informative and striking posters that complement the spoken and written word and thus create long lasting visual memories.

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In Reply:

We share Dr Hahnengress's opinion that the visual potential of posters is often exploited to an insufficient degree. We also welcome the idea that the visual presentation of poster contributions should be improved and regarded as a part of the evaluation criteria of a poster exhibition. At this year's congress for specialists in internal medicine in Wiesbaden, several tutorials were offered on how to devise posters and presentations while using modern methods and presentational formats. Medical professionals' skills in this regard are certainly in need of improvement.

We do not share the view that a published article and a poster as presentational formats of scientific topics are of equal value; article publication is subject to a far more rigorous review process than is usual and feasible for a poster.

The authors thank Dr Haß for his critical review of our data. Indeed, we did not survey every 1 in 5 participants—the method section says that 1 in 5 passers-by were randomly approached in the context of our study and included in the survey. Randomization is done in

studies in which subjects may receive different treatments. As we asked all our participants the same questions, randomization was not required.

It is correct that a single, national, specialist conference was chosen—however, this required substantial effort, and we believe that the data we collected can be transferred to other specialist societies. For this reason, we decided to submit our data not to the specialist journal of the specialist society but to *Deutsches Ärzteblatt*. The reviewers and editors of *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* seem to share our belief that the data are applicable at a more general level.

With regard to the participants in the poster discussions, we regret that the way in which we explained the process was not clearly understandable. A total of 388 posters were exhibited. A total of 38 separate poster presentations were conducted; all these were included in our collection. Altogether 467 persons participated in these presentations. Of the conference participants we surveyed, 39.4% reported having visited the poster exhibition. We succeeded in interviewing 122 randomly selected poster authors and obtain data. We did not succeed in getting answers to all questions from all poster authors as we had already discussed some of the

questions in the interviews before the actual exhibition times. We did not have the time to interview more poster authors during the limited exhibition times.

We share our reader's view that the participation rate in the poster presentations was low and the posters' scientific value was not rated highly—we were also surprised that many posters were "recycled." Consequently we share the reader's view that some things are indeed rather farcical. However, we still think that our data show that this does not apply to everything: young scientists and the visitors of the poster exhibitions personally benefited from the poster exhibition and tend to regard such exhibitions as valuable.

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Conflict of interest statement

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