Director's Forum

Making the Most of a Professional Meeting

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The *Director's Forum* series is designed to guide pharmacy leaders in establishing patient-centered services in hospitals and health systems. During the early winter months, pharmacists will converge upon a major city and participate in the Midyear Clinical Meeting ("Midyear") of the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists. This meeting involves almost 21,000 students, residents, and new and seasoned professionals catching up with colleagues and classmates, networking for better practice solutions, and presenting their organization's successes. In this era of fiscal restraint, many hospitals are reducing travel expenses and limiting the participation of their staff in professional meetings. In the past, professional meetings may have been seen as a boondoggle, but they can benefit individuals at all stages of their career (student, mid-level, and late careers). Students can make vital career decisions through information received at professional meetings, mid-level career individuals will gain valuable ideas for practice model enhancement, and late career individuals can provide mentoring for younger and mid-level career professionals. If properly managed, attendance at a professional meeting can have very positive benefits on the career growth of pharmacy staff and help in the pharmacy department's development of effective patient-centered services.

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) sponsors 2 professional meetings a year with the purpose of uniting past colleagues and friends, creating new knowledge through education sessions, and promoting the important role of health system pharmacy to the media and public. Historically, ASHP sponsored the annual meeting in June to conduct the business of the Society: instating officers, voting on new policies and procedures, and honoring members with awards. To recognize ASHP's clinical achievements and their focus on patient-centered pharmacy services, ASHP also sponsors a December meeting, which is known as the Midyear Clinical Meeting or Midyear.

The Midyear is the world's largest gathering of pharmacists, with some 21,000 pharmacists, students, and others attending. This meeting has become a world stage for pharmacy, and most pharmacy directors budget for 1 or more members of their staff to attend. Depending on the location, a pharmacist attending a Midyear meeting may cost an organization upwards of \$2,500 to \$3,000 for their travel, registration, food, and lodging. For departments that have residency programs, that are recruiting for positions, or have staff who are presenting papers, as many as 5 to 10

department members may attend the Midyear. The cost of this attendance becomes a budget figure that some administrators may be hesitant to support, given the climate of cost-containment in health care.

The participation of pharmacists is growing in other professional organizations and medical societies. For example, the Society for Critical Care Medicine (SCCM) has established a section for pharmacists and has had pharmacy participation in their meetings since the 1980s. SCCM grants fellowship status to pharmacists (FCCM) and has even elected a pharmacist as president (Dr. Judith Jacobi). Infectious diseases, nutrition, and burn medical society meetings are open to pharmacists, but many have very costly registration and lodging fees. As the specialty interests of the pharmacist staff grow, the director of pharmacy will have to determine what meeting or meetings to fund. He or she will also have to justify the cost of attendance.

Professional meetings can have great benefit for pharmacy staff and the department. This article will (1) describe the importance of attending professional meetings; (2) discuss pre-planning in advance of attending a professional meeting; (3) detail how attendance at a professional meeting differs for students,

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new practitioners, and mid- and late-career pharmacists; and (4) describe how information gathered at a professional meeting can contribute to personal and department growth. As pharmacy budgets become tighter and as discretionary money for travel to professional meetings is reduced, pharmacy directors must continue to justify the expense of meeting attendance to hospital administrators and staff. If properly managed, attendance at professional meetings can have very positive benefits on individual career growth and can help the department to develop effective patient-centered pharmacy services.

IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Professional meetings are important for both individuals and organizations. Innovative projects are often first presented to the public at these meetings. Researchers involved in landmark trials will often present preliminary results at a meeting before the full manuscript is published. The access to this information ahead of print, and the ability to interface with researchers, can be instrumental in positioning an organization for changes in practice. A recent example of this was ASHP's Pharmacy Practice Model Summit. The Summit was held in November 2010, and the results of the Summit were presented at the ASHP 2011 Summer meeting. The results and associated commentaries were published during 2012. Participants in the ASHP Summer 2011 meeting were given an excellent preview of the results of the PPMI Summit as well as advanced knowledge about the Summit findings. New practice models and results of clinical research can be translated to clinical practice well ahead of peer-reviewed publication.

Officers and other stakeholders may use professional meetings to further support the organization's goals. Information they gain at these meetings can help them manage the administrative processes of policy and procedure changes and establish mission statements and vision. In addition, professional advocacy can be strengthened at meetings. For example, groups that want to convince State Boards of Pharmacy about the value of "tech-check-tech" programs can meet and develop approaches to convince lawmakers to allow this practice.

PLANNING PROCESS FOR ATTENDING A PROFESSIONAL MEETING

The first step for a pharmacy director in justifying attendance at a professional meeting is to determine the reasons for attending. Each meeting is different and will offer different benefits. The Midyear presents

clinical topics and provides initial contacts with prospective residents. The American College of Clinical Pharmacy (ACCP) Annual Meeting offers programming on various clinical topics that can help promote clinical services in the organization or enhance individual clinical knowledge. The ASHP Leadership Conference is focused on current topics in leadership and issues facing pharmacy departments.

Professional meetings provide opportunities to recruit highly trained individuals, and this may be a sole justification for attending. Most professional meetings have formal recruitment venues, such as the Personnel Placement Service (PPS) at Midyear. In addition, the opportunity to interact with various practitioners from across the United States provides an excellent network for future recruiting efforts. By interacting with current leaders, practitioners, and residents, pharmacy directors can connect with individuals who are seeking positions.

Health care organizations are under extreme financial pressure to minimize costs and maximize employee efficiency. The ability to provide organizational value by attending professional meetings is essential to maintain support for travel. This can be illustrated by the following case. You are a director of pharmacy at a 300-bed hospital and have 3 staffing vacancies, including an assistant director position. You submit a proposal to your boss to spend \$6,000 for you and another staff member to attend the Midyear meeting to recruit for these positions. You are paying an agency staffing \$150,000 yearly, and you are unable to implement cost-savings programs (because you don't have an assistant director). If you hire the pharmacists and the assistant director using the meeting placement services, you will save on agency fees (a net savings of around \$50,000 given the \$100,000 pharmacist salary) and will begin to see additional savings from cost initiatives. From that perspective, it seems like a "no brainer" to fund attendance at a professional meeting.

Professional meetings, especially large meetings, can be very overwhelming. Tens of thousands of individuals may attend these meetings, which are usually held at convention centers or hotels. Regardless of the reason for attendance, advanced planning will allow attendees to get the most out of the meeting. Detailed schedules, with topic, presenter(s), location, and continuing education information, are published well in advance of the meeting to allow attendees to draft a schedule for their visits. If recruitment or job seeking is the primary purpose for attending, even more advanced planning is necessary.

The residency showcase for students can be extremely overwhelming. Without extensive advanced

planning, they may not be able to make the connections that begin the residency process. The goal of the residency showcase is to allow students to connect with programs and to begin the process of identifying whether a particular program is the right fit.¹ With more than a thousand residency spots, it is obviously impossible for students to have a conversation with each program; advanced planning is necessary for them to identify what they are looking for in a residency program. Specific advice on this has been discussed previously.^{2,3}

Persons who attend a professional meeting to seek a position need to set up meeting times prior to arrival. This will ensure that they have the opportunity to explore all the positions they are interested in. If the meeting has a formal recruitment event, such as PPS at Midyear, there will likely be a process for scheduling times with institutions. Alternatively, contacting the leaders of organizations with available positions and discussing the opportunities over coffee or dinner can be an excellent job search strategy. It will likely give the job seeker additional insight into the positions and an advantage over other candidates.

Professional meetings are an excellent place to reconnect with former classmates, previous co-residents, or past co-workers. Meetings only last a few days and everyone has a busy schedule, so advanced planning is essential to make the best use of limited time.

PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS AND CAREER GOALS

As pharmacists move through their career, their primary goal for attending a meeting will change.

Students/Residents

Professional meetings can be a very exciting for students. It is a glimpse into the profession they are just starting to love. Professional meeting organizers embrace student attendance, since they are the future of the profession. Most meetings have a student track where educational material is presented. Student social events provide networking opportunities. The opportunity for students to network with current leaders is a major advantage for them. Connections made as a student may secure a residency position or a perfect job in 7 to 10 years. Students also have access to most or all of the clinical content being presented at a meeting. Although many students may see attending a meeting as a break from class, extremely interesting and innovative topics are presented at meetings and exposure to these topics early in a career is very beneficial.

As students graduate and assume residency positions, the purpose for attending the professional

meeting begins to change. During residency training, an attendee to the Midyear will have many commitments, including presenting research projects (as a poster or platform presentation). Residents are also active in recruiting the next class of residents, while trying to interview for their first job. It is critical for residents to plan their time wisely during the meeting in order to meet their commitments and network to secure employment or even an additional residency. The resident role at a professional meeting is by far the most complex, and support or advice from colleagues and preceptors is necessary to make the meeting a success for these attendees.

New to mid-level practitioner

The career growth from new practitioner to the mid-level career presents different priorities and activities for a professional meeting. New practitioners are establishing their practice philosophy and are interested in learning new things. Mid-career professionals have the education and experience (usually 7-10 years) to land their dream job. They are focused on reconnecting with mentors and identifying potential positions that may give them an inside track to the job they've always wanted. Additionally, mid-level practitioners may have the expertise in an area to conduct a platform presentation. For both the new and mid-level career pharmacists, their focus should be on presenting papers/symposia, networking to find the "dream job," and beginning to mentor students and residents in their career choices.

Late-career pharmacists

Pharmacists later in their career have the opportunity to give back to younger members of the organization. They can provide mentorship to younger members interested in their area of expertise. They can provide insight on many historical topics and can continue to shape their legacy and the future of the organization. Late-career pharmacists often still present many topics as posters and platforms at professional meetings; these presentations are usually the result of their mentoring activities.

CONCLUSION

Organizations will continue to support attendance at profession meetings if they can see value being returned. Meeting attendees should make every effort to bring what they learn at meetings back to the organization. The implementation of a program that is introduced at a meeting can be a way to justify attendance. Calculation of a return

on investment is always important and will help communicate pharmacy's impact to hospital executives. Discussing meeting topics with staff can be a way to include all staff in the professional meeting process and may help them understand complex topics or new therapies.

Travel, lodging, and meeting registration costs make attending a meeting very expensive. Attendees should make an effort to minimize these costs by driving to the location or sharing a room with co-workers. In addition, registration is often free for attendees who participate as a speaker or an officer.

Professional meetings can benefit individuals at all stages of their career (student, mid-level, and late careers). Students can make vital career decisions through contacts made and information gained at professional meetings, mid-level career individuals will get ideas for

practice model enhancement, and late-career individuals can provide valuable mentoring for younger and mid-level career professionals. If properly managed, attendance at professional meetings can have very positive benefits on career growth and can help the department to develop effective patient-centered pharmacy services.

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