

Impact of COVID-19 on professional societies in the eating disorders field

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The impact of the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been deeply felt across the globe and perhaps disproportionately so by those living with or vulnerable to eating disorders (Weissman & Hay, 2022). Growing evidence indicates that the pandemic has been associated with increases in eating disorder prevalence and treatment referrals along with exacerbation of symptoms (e.g., Linardon et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2022). However, little has been written about the impact of COVID-19 on professional societies. As current President (JJT) of the Academy for Eating Disorders (AED), and immediate Past-President (KTE) of the Eating Disorders Research Society (EDRS), and we highlight the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 has presented our respective societies and explain how our field can ensure that both societies emerge stronger on the other side of the pandemic.

1 | CHALLENGES

The two most pressing challenges for AED and EDRS in the setting of COVID-19 have been severely curtailed opportunities for in-person interaction and threats to financial health.

1.1 | Curtailed opportunities for in-person interaction

Due to lockdowns, limitations on gathering size, and travel restrictions, our field has not convened in-person for nearly 3 years. Indeed, AED has moved three conferences to a virtual format (2020, 2021, and 2022); and EDRS has moved two (2020 and 2021)—so far. The move to virtual meetings has limited opportunities for spontaneous in-person interaction and hindered the field's ability to exchange

ideas. We wholeheartedly agree with Weissman and Hay's (2022) assessment that “the scale of the challenges posed by COVID-19 calls for collaborations across geographic, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries” (p. 159). In-person meetings have the power to initiate these collaborations: The two of us first met at a conference nearly 20 years ago, and now we co-direct a clinical research program.

1.2 | Threats to financial health

The cancelation of in-person meetings has led to financial challenges. Meeting insurance does not cover pandemic-related cancelations, and hefty deposits (which are due well in advance) evaporate when a society moves a conference online. Both AED and EDRS have experienced significant financial losses for the cancelation of in-person meetings in Sydney, Sitges, Boston, and Monterrey. With variants circulating, there has also been significant uncertainty around conference format—will the next conference be in-person? Virtual? A hybrid combination of the two? This uncertainty has led to delegates delaying registration, and societies having to plan multiple contingency formats and potential budgets for the same conference. Hybrid meetings are especially expensive to hold, requiring payment both for the in-person venue as well as the online platform. They also bring up additional uncertainties and costs related to integrating in-person and virtual attendees to maximize the training experience for both.

2 | OPPORTUNITIES

In the spirit of holding the dialectic, we also recognize opportunities, most notably the increased global reach of virtual meetings and opportunities for innovation afforded by novel technologies.

2.1 | Increased global reach

Conferences can be costly to delegates and are financially out of reach for many colleagues from low- and middle-income countries who would add significant intellectual value to our meetings. Moving conferences online and obviating the need for travel has provided both societies with opportunities to significantly reduce barriers to attendance. Indeed, AED's 2020 meeting was the most well-attended in its nearly three-decade history, hosting over 1600 delegates. Both societies have begun offering content on demand, enabling members with pressing clinical, childcare, or other responsibilities to watch recordings on their own schedule. Furthermore, for the first time, EDRS (historically open only to members and their sponsored mentees) opened the 2021 meeting to non-members. And both societies offered a subset of conference content free of charge to early-career scholars during the pandemic (e.g., AED's research training day, EDRS's young investigators meeting). Expanding the global reach of our conferences across geographical and economic lines has great potential to nurture international collaborations (which are crucial to our small field) and enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (which has recently been highlighted as a priority area in eating disorders; see Goel et al., 2022).

2.2 | Opportunities for innovation afforded by novel technologies

As a field (and as a world) we have had an accelerated immersion in online communication, creating exciting opportunities to leverage novel technology for teaching and collaboration. Whereas many of us remember huddling in conference rooms around a spider phone, or calling into voice-only conference lines, we now can see each other's faces on video calls. As the pandemic has progressed, virtual conference platforms have become increasingly sophisticated and better able to not only mimic the in-person conference experience (e.g., virtual avatars can peruse poster sessions and initiate spontaneous videoconferences with other delegates), but even offer novel features that are unique to the online format (e.g., real-time polling that can be instantaneously integrated into a speaker's online presentation). There are some novelties that neither AED nor EDRS has yet broached (e.g., telepresence robots—in which the faces of virtual attendees appear on motorized tablet screens to facilitate casual mingling with in-person delegates), but the possibilities are seemingly endless.

3 | CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 has presented both challenges and opportunities for professional societies. As leaders, we are committed to overcoming challenges by safely returning to in-person meetings as soon as possible and maintaining a conservative spending approach to stabilize finances; while leveraging opportunities by offering on-demand or

hybrid options, even if the main meeting is in-person, to continue expanding global reach and inviting diverse perspectives. But to do this, we need your support: The best way to ensure that our professional societies can remain your professional homes in the long-term is to (1) renew your membership or join for the first time, and (2) contribute to our meetings by submitting your strongest scientific content and participating in interactive conference discussions. With your participation, we can advance our organizations' missions to hold annual meetings where the most recent research in the field can be presented and discussed (EDRS), and advance eating disorder prevention, education, treatment, and research by expanding the global community of committed professionals (AED).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jennifer J. Thomas: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Kamryn T. Eddy:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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