

IADVL–Delhi State Branch MID- CUTICON 2020: Setting a Precedent with its semi-annual E-conference

The emergence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a pandemic has forced health authorities and organizations to cancel conferences and academic events across the world. Social distancing and stay-at-home measures as a step to minimize the spread of COVID-19 have prevented people from face-to-face interactions. Amidst this crisis, for learning to continue, organizations are now diverting from the conventional way of organizing conferences.^[1] Virtual online platforms are a new place to hold a meeting by and for the scientific community.^[2] With the advancements in technology, organizing conferences as webinars is now achievable and the learnings can be channelized to anyone.^[3] With this at hand, Indian Association of Dermatology, Venereology & Leprology, Delhi state branch (IADVL-DSB) decided to hold its summer conference, the mid-year Cuticon, as an e-conference on 17th May, 2020. The theme of the conference was “Dermatology through Technology,” and the conference received a lot of appreciation from attendees across the nation and abroad. It was a first of its kind, path-breaking initiative by the team of the Delhi state branch. This article highlights the various aspects of holding an e-conference and how they were successfully applied to IADVL-DSB Mid Cuticon 2020.

Format of the Conference

An e-conference can have an asynchronous (pre-recorded videos), a synchronous (stream live presentations), or a mixed approach. For our conference, we chose the synchronous approach where speakers presented live. The program of the event was designed in a similar fashion as that of a conventional

conference [Figure 1a and b]. We wanted that the audience should be able to relate this online event with their previous experiences in physical conferences. The program was divided into various sessions. Each session had either short lectures, debates, or panel discussions. A tea break and a lunch break were given at appropriate intervals, to keep the interest of the audience alive.

We had one or two chairpersons moderating each session, and a master of ceremonies who conducted the proceedings of the conference. It was a 7-h conference, which began with an introduction, the welcome address by the president of the association, an invocation to the goddess of knowledge, Goddess Saraswati, and the virtual release of a newsletter. This was followed by the scientific programme. A vote of thanks was delivered at the end.

Registration for the Event

The event and scientific program were disseminated through various social media platforms, emails, and digital dermatologist groups as well as in the various IADVL groups. The conference was open to delegates who were provisional, associate or life members of IADVL. No registration amount was charged from the delegates, but registration was mandatory to attend the conference. A registration link was provided, which took the delegates to the registration page. Registration could be done by providing the name and contact details along with the IADVL membership number [Figure 2]. It could be done prior to the start or anytime during the conference. We had over 3,100 logins, which well surpassed the numbers in a physical conference.

**Gulhima Arora,
Deepak Jakhar¹,
Sujay Khandpur²,
Ishmeet Kaur¹**

*Consultant Dermatologist,
Mehektagul Dermaclinic,
¹Department of Dermatology,
North Delhi Municipal
Corporation Medical College
and Hindu Rao Hospital,
²Department of Dermatology,
Leprology and STD, All India
Institute of Medical Sciences,
New Delhi, India*

Address for correspondence:

*Dr. Ishmeet Kaur,
Department of Dermatology,
North Delhi Municipal
Corporation Medical
College and Hindu Rao
Hospital, New Delhi, India.
E-mail: ishmeet.kaur.dr@gmail.
com*

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Platform for Hosting the Event

Our information technology (IT) team enlisted various online platforms suitable for holding the event. After discussing with the team, we decided on a twin ZOOM platform, with a separate interface for the speakers and delegates. This ensured a better bandwidth at the speaker interface and no interference from the delegate interface. We

wanted a platform with which the speakers and delegates were familiar with. In addition, ZOOM allows a smooth interface with multiple speakers from many locations to be accommodated at the same time and facilitates a connection with a large number of participants [Figure 3]. The delegates can engage with the speaker by texting their questions in the “chat box.” The audio and video inputs of all the faculty and delegates could be controlled from



Figure 1: The conference theme (a) and conference program (b) for IADVL-Delhi State Branch MID-CUTICON 2020



Figure 2: Registration page of the conference

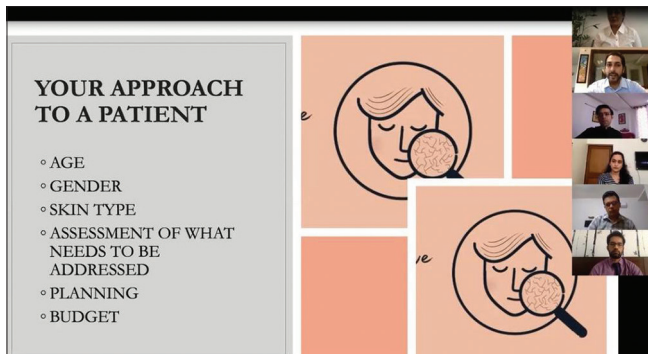


Figure 3: Delegate interface/screen showing presentation and faculty members

host-end, ensuring a smooth conduct of the proceedings. The presentations were planned to be projected through screen sharing.^[4]

Test run two days before the conference

For a smooth coordination and to familiarize the speakers and chairpersons with the flow of the conference, a test run was planned 2 days prior to it, to simulate the event. During the test run, the support and technical teams were also present. Any improvements, modifications or technical difficulties were discussed then and there. It was very important to check the quality of the audio-visual, brief the presenters about the software and to try and minimize IT issues during the conference.

Presentations and Panel Discussions

There were 10 sessions in total, with six didactic lectures and four illustrious panel discussions. The topics included those from clinical dermatology as well as aesthetics and LASERS. There were 42 faculty members including speakers and chairpersons. Two separate interfaces were created: one for the delegates, where they could view the presentation as well as the speakers and put up their queries in chat-box; and second for the interaction of the faculty, organizing team and technical team, for smooth coordination.

Audience engagement

The delegates were encouraged to put up their written questions during the sessions. Each question was then put forward to the speaker or panelist by the master of ceremonies, to whom they were routed.

Educational grant

An educational grant toward expenses for the conference was sought from 15 pharmaceutical companies. Their presence and contributions were highlighted in the form of filler slides with their company logos and product brands in between sessions and during the breaks. Each of the companies was mailed an e-certificate for their participation in the first of its kind e-conference.

Appreciation for the Faculty

Both the speakers as well as the chairpersons were given e-certificates for their contribution, and a gift voucher was mailed to them as a token of appreciation.

Challenges

An overwhelming positive response was received after the conference from dermatologists across the country. It was a new experience for all members of the team, exciting yet challenging. Our internal analysis (during and after the conference) brought out several key issues. Most important was the internet connectivity. For an adequate video and audio experience, the speaker and the delegate should have an adequate internet connectivity, broadband width, and speed at their respective ends. A poor connectivity can cause a loss of interest among the delegates. In our test run, we ensured that each of our faculty had a good connectivity for the smooth conduction of the conference and those who had problems were suggested solutions. The professional one-to-one interaction between the faculty and delegates was not possible through this medium. Parallel sessions could not be planned, as it shall require more sophisticated technology. CME credit points could not be sought, as there was no such provision with the state council for an e-conference. The delegates who registered during the conference could not be verified during the proceedings, and the link needs to be more robust to ensure a targeted audience.

Future Recommendations

Virtual medical conferences on a large scale is a newer concept and it is always better to keep a checklist at hand before organizing one [Table 1].^[5] An effective pre-planning and coordination between the organizing team and IT team is vital. The platform for holding such events should have a dynamic interface, support cross-device access, providing adequate opportunity to speakers and delegates to engage in a lively discussion. Investment in good internet speed with adequate bandwidth is most essential, as they decide an uninterrupted delivery of the efforts of speakers and organizing team. These can be assured with a rehearsal between the organizers 2–3 days prior to the actual date. Lastly, scientific content will decide the success of such an event. More interactive sessions rather than didactic lectures are expected to be better at keeping the interest of delegates alive.

Conclusion

Advanced online communication technologies have given us an opportunity to continue learning through online platforms, which was not possible a decade ago. Given the clear benefits, the scientific community should embrace it with open arms. The elimination of travel cost, conference

Table 1: Checklist for organizing a virtual conference**Preplanning of a virtual conference**

An effective and experienced organizing and IT coordinating team.

Obtain a secure platform, which can accommodate a large number of viewers with a separate interface for delegates and speakers.

An e-designed brochure, with a robust scientific content to be prepared and sent via various digital platforms, to ensure adequate publicity.

The e-conference link for the speakers and delegates to be given in advance; with the link leading to the registration page.

All technical aspects to be spelt out with the technical team in advance.

A dry run to the e-conference to be done a few days prior to the main event with the chairpersons, faculty, master of ceremonies and the technical team to ensure familiarization with the digital system, login and smooth conduct for the main event.

Host rights to be shared by one member other than that from the technical team for the faculty interface to control the audio and video, to avoid any interference.

Recording of lectures prior to the conference, thus using a mixed format, to save an embarrassment from an inadvertent technical glitch.

The panel discussions which use a synchronous format, however, are best streamed live. A prior substitute for the moderator can be chosen in case of a technical glitch at his/her end.

A high-speed internet connectivity with a broad bandwidth is essential at the speaker's end, in case a pure synchronous format is used.

Virtual interaction rooms for interaction between the delegates and faculty (questions and answers)

cost, and access to knowledge from anywhere in the world, from the comfort of one's home, are some of the distinct advantages offered by virtual conferences. They may not replace physical conferences completely (socializing and networking one-to-one), but they would definitely play an adjunctive role in spreading knowledge. Recognition by various medical councils by way of providing CME credit points for these digital conferences shall help ensure wider participation and their recognition as a medium of formal medical education.

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Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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