

Are ophthalmic conferences losing their relevance and how to reverse this trend?

Dear Sir,

Medical conferences help in refining the skills of physicians consistently through updating them with the latest developments and technologies.^[1-3] Over the last few years, the number of ophthalmic conferences is steadily increasing. Organizers are putting lot of effort to hold these events and sponsors are spending lot of money. However, a serious concern is the decreasing number of participants, particularly young ophthalmologists, that is visible from empty scientific halls. Since many educational videos are easily available on internet and ophthalmic teaching platforms (such as Webinar, Podcast, YouTube/Eyetube, Whats-App, and other social media platform), it is pertinent to ask the question- Are ophthalmic conferences losing their relevance and how to reverse this trend by increasing participation in these conferences and how young ophthalmologists can maximize benefits from these conferences?

Ophthalmic conferences are supposed to fulfill a critically important role in the ongoing education of young ophthalmologists, ophthalmic residents, and practicing ophthalmologists. There are many objectives which these conferences meet apart from merely imparting education: Sharpening the surgical skills, ability to interact with peers/key opinion ophthalmic leaders, trying newly introduced equipment, and developing consensus in contentious areas, all leading to improvement in eye-care delivery, and visual outcomes.

The health paradigm is changing swiftly and ophthalmology is growing rapidly too and ophthalmic surgical procedures are upgrading with new and innovative techniques and equipments. The ophthalmological fraternity across the globe needs to keep up with this change and development. To individually keep up with these radical changes may not be as feasible for the professionals. Ophthalmic conferences fulfill this need and play a critical role in the education of ophthalmic surgeons and other medical professionals such as optometrists and ophthalmic technicians.

Here are some benefits that ophthalmology residents/young ophthalmologists can avail if they choose to make use of the opportunities that ophthalmological conventions offer:

1. **Improve Surgical Skills:** Ophthalmology requires the professionals to have highly accurate skills to practice intricate eye surgeries that require maximum precision with minimum to no room for error. These conferences usually offer skill transfer courses and can help fresh ophthalmologists learn new surgical techniques and improve these skills before they start their hand-on ocular surgeries.
2. **Professional Networking:** Ophthalmic conferences are an opportunity for young ophthalmologists to meet the pioneers of the field from all over the world. They can form connections that can help them improve their practice and grow in their profession. Conferences offer tremendous opportunity for young professionals to develop networking

and cast a positive impression to ensure a fellowship and/or superspecialty training.

3. **Beyond Education Training:** Being a medical professional, your learning never ends. It is the need of the profession and requirement for competency. Conferences offer training that helps you remain updated and knowledgeable at all levels.
4. **Setting Career Scope:** Meeting with the specialists of the field, who have been working for years and have remarkable experience in hand, can offer counseling to entrants for career establishment. They can understand the scope of the career they are aiming for and get a glimpse of how it is going to be should they choose to pursue a particular career line.

Now question comes how young residents/young ophthalmologists can take maximum benefits from the ophthalmic conferences? With the perks of acquiring information and building networks, there are some preparatory and attending obligations that need to be fulfilled to take maximum benefit of the conferences. Here are some of them:

1. **Set Yourself Apart from the Crowd:** Conferences have numerous participants from all across the world. It is important that you set yourself apart from the crowd. This can only happen if you get visible enough in the event. The best way to do so is to take up a role. Becoming a presenter, facilitator, or volunteer (e.g. during a skill transfer course) can help you gain an edge over other participants.
2. **Strive for Connections:** When you attend an ophthalmic conference, treat it as an opportunity to make yourself known to the fraternity. You need to socialize more and connect with professionals from diverse backgrounds. The more you develop relationships with ophthalmologists, key-opinion leaders, and known surgeons of your field, the better networking you will have.
3. **Select the Conference Carefully:** Being in the field of ophthalmology, there are several invitations for sessions. You need to be careful in your selection. Choose the conferences that are most relevant to your subspecialty or area of interest. Analyze the breakdown of each session you are invited in and then narrow down the ones that are most relevant to your career choice. If you do not filter these invitations and choose to avail all of them, it would only take up your time unnecessarily for things and skills you do not need. So, be vigilant in choosing the sessions.
4. **Remember What You Learn:** This should be your priority. Conferences are meant to educate and train you. Networking and other things come alongside. The ultimate objective is to inform and you should be making use of this objective. Sessions can get prolonged and information dense, but you need to absorb the knowledge imparted on you. This is the only way you can implement the new technology, policy, or knowledge in your practice for which the session is organized.

Every young ophthalmologist wants a successful career and ophthalmological conferences are playing a tremendous role in helping us get there. The information technology advancement has facilitated the process of organizing ophthalmological conferences. The ability to conduct and attend the conferences virtually, offering simulation training and relaying online learning resources have helped

yield positive results for the ophthalmological fraternity. Simulation training sessions offer ophthalmologists to get hands-on experience before practicing them in real. This has served in improving the skills of ophthalmologists and has brought a constructive progress in the overall results. In the present age, the medium of presenting and attending conferences has changed the nature of conferences, but their effectiveness has only escalated with time. They are more beneficial and informative now than they used to be. More young professionals and residents-in-training are now able to become part of these conferences irrespective of their location. Some examples are All India Ophthalmological Society, Academic Research Committee (AIOS ARC) educational program, iFocus (national postgraduate education program in Ophthalmology), and Young Ophthalmologist Society of India (YOSI), Women in Ophthalmology Society (WOS) conferences, which have done a remarkable job to update ophthalmology training in India.

Is there any scope for improvement of ophthalmic conferences? There is always room for improvement to make things and procedures better than they already are. First thing that needs to be covered is the number of ophthalmic conferences. While each conference is important, the schedule and commitments of the ophthalmologists should be valued as well. The number of ophthalmic conferences should be limited and should be organized in an efficient manner with more emphasis on specialized conferences rather than generic. Ophthalmology requires more skilled and trained professionals. Therefore, specific areas should be focused on skill development to ensure efficiency. With an increasing trend to organize more and more ophthalmic conferences, there is bound to be repetition, which makes these conferences less attractive. We need to focus on quality and reducing the quantity will perhaps make them more relevant.

Every ophthalmic conference needs to have a specific goal and vision that is achieved by the end of the meeting. It is important that the conferences are backed by extensive research, or else the purpose of the event would remain unachieved. The organizers also need to be aware that educational material is today available at the push of a button, and therefore the conferences need to reorient in a manner that they are useful over and beyond the material available on the internet. Some organizations are doing that like Mentor Mentee and Women in Research program by the Women Ophthalmological Society.

In summary, ophthalmic conferences are an important element in the advancement of the ophthalmologic field and training of ophthalmologists. They serve as a platform to unite and educate the practicing ophthalmologists and improve the quality of eye care. The importance of ophthalmic conferences cannot be undermined at any stage. They have the capability to

achieve multiple goals simultaneously and render remarkably constructive outcomes that inflict positive effects on the overall public health and wellbeing. However, we need to be focused in our approach toward conferences and ensure that they serve their purpose.

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