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## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### Is This Au Revoir or a Permanent Farewell to In-Person Meetings?



*To the Editor:* Although the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) leadership made the difficult decision to move our Annual Meeting to a fully virtual experience to protect the safety of our attendees, exhibitors, and patients, we still believe that there is a future for live meetings.

Will the world of medical education activities change because of COVID-19? Definitely! We strongly believe that our virtual Annual Meeting will allow us to reach a broader audience with our important educational and scientific content. During our discovery phase, we collected information that suggested that many of our attendees, particularly those traveling internationally, would not have attended in person this year, even if travel restrictions were lifted. In addition, those who had been designated to “keep the home fires burning” in their institution or practice would not have attended. By delivering the full Annual Meeting, not a partial meeting or a highlight of select sessions, we will be able to continue to educate our members and guests by showcasing all of this year’s critical research. For those who have not attended in the past, our virtual format will allow us to show them what they have been missing and potentially engage their interest to attend a future live meeting. In discussions with our members, we found that many institutions will be open to signing up most or all their faculty for our virtual meeting because they will be saving the travel expense associated with attending in person.

As we thought through options for our 2020 Annual Meeting, it became clear that social distancing in large conference session rooms, the exhibit hall, and hallways would not be feasible. As we look to 2021 and beyond, the full viability of large conferences will depend on a SARS-CoV2 vaccine and/or effective treatment. Once we can assure attendees that they can attend the meeting safely, we are confident they will come back. On review of our Annual Meeting evaluations, one of the top reasons cited for

attendance is networking with colleagues, friends, former classmates, and exhibitors. The social and networking aspect of the meeting may not be easy to measure, but it is no less important than the educational and scientific sessions. Whether we run into a former collaborator and want to discuss a challenging case or want to see a demonstration of a new piece of equipment, these are both ways that we are learning and advancing the science of the field.

An important, positive change we see is that adding a robust virtual meeting activity will allow us to reach those in radiation oncology we have not been able to reach in the past. Even when we restart our live meeting format, we plan to keep a virtual component, perhaps with a subset of highlight sessions for each disease site, so that learners can continue to access critical advances in the field. For some, the ease of being able to attend from home, keep working, and attend at their own pace may be how they will continue engaging in learning.

Our decision to produce a “best in class” virtual meeting with opportunities to interact with colleagues, ask questions of faculty, wander around the exhibit hall, and see product demonstrations will provide ASTRO members and nonmember attendees with an immersive educational activity that they can experience in real time or when they have some down time over the course of a month. One way that this experience will help evolve our future meetings is that attendees will become more comfortable with virtual technology, which will allow us to push the envelope on interactivity and technology at our live meetings. It also allows attendees to personalize their education and engage in self-directed learning, and it strengthens our data collection efforts to gather gap analysis and needs assessments to better tailor educational activities and tools in the future. In addition, over the course of 2020, we have become more comfortable with interacting virtually with colleagues and creating new avenues to connect.

Finally, with the shift to virtual and online content, we think many of our members will have increased access to the ASTRO Academy of enduring activities to help secure their needed continuing medical education credits. We also expect to see an overall increase in courses completed in the ASTRO Academy.

This is a time of great challenge for our field, medicine, and the nation. Radiation oncologists have not wavered in their commitment to caring for patients during this crisis

Disclosures: none.

and have continued to demonstrate real value to society. These demands have made multiple aspects of communicating and learning more challenging, and it is hard to predict exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic will redefine our interactions in the future. What is clear is that as a field, we need to be at the forefront of educational technology so that our rich science is showcased across the globe and access to learning is made easy. We look forward to the time when every other sentence does not begin with “pandemic,” “social distancing,” or “these are interesting times” and we can again see and learn together in person. Although it is unfortunate this time has not yet arrived, we acknowledge the pandemic has forced us to evolve in positive ways more quickly than we otherwise would. The introduction of high-quality virtual meeting formats is one such positive change, and we believe there is no turning

back from virtual meetings becoming a permanent part of our meeting portfolio. We look forward to seeing your avatars for our virtual Annual Meeting in October... Au Revoir!

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