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Editorial

Yearning for face-to-face meetings[☆]

El anhelo de los congresos presenciales



No one could have predicted that the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection identified in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province in the People's Republic of China, would end up changing our lives so much¹.

The World Health Organisation recognised the coronavirus pandemic on the 11th of March 2020², and two days later the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, announced in an institutional release the state of alarm as an exceptional measure to limit contagions.

Said state of alarm brought difficult days. Along the way, friends and family have gone, some of them without the chance to say their last goodbyes. Hospitals were overwhelmed, our health workers, estranged from their families, worked at the edge of exhaustion with the sole desire to save as many lives as possible. Every day at dusk, warm applause coloured the sadness that filled the air; such heartfelt applause was an acknowledgement of our heroes and an outlet for all our suffering.

The restrictions of the state of alarm led to the cancellation and postponement *sine die* of the main scientific societies' congresses, including those on ophthalmology. Cities such as Burgos (Spanish Retina and Vitreous Society [SERV]), Palma de Mallorca and Seville (Spanish Glaucoma Society [SEG]), Madrid (Spanish Society of Strabology and Paediatric Ophthalmology [SEEOP]), Zaragoza (Spanish Society of Implant and Refractive Ocular Surgery [SECOIR]) and Santiago de Compostela (Spanish Society of Ocular and Orbit Plastic Surgery [SECPOOO] and The Spanish Ophthalmology Society [SEO]) have been unable to welcome a multitude of national and international ophthalmologists to their cities and hotels.

But the pandemic was no match for the eagerness of scientific societies and the pharmaceutical industry which, protected by new technologies, began to organise a multitude of *online* meetings and webinars. And these became a part of our lives, they were the window to leave home, open up to the

world and connect with our colleagues and friends to discuss clinical cases. They were for a while our “new normal”.

There were those who played the fortune teller and predicted that *online* conferences and webinars would mean the end of face-to-face conferences, emphasising the benefits of these new formats, which included greater simplicity, larger audiences, lower cost, and content available for days or weeks that favoured on-demand viewing of the conference. There is no doubt that virtual and digital training is here to stay and we will probably move towards a hybrid format, but an *online* meeting will never be comparable to a face-to-face congress because it lacks something very important: direct interaction, both formal and informal, between the attendees. In addition to the scientific component, face-to-face conferences allow us to see each other, greet each other and feel the presence of our friends, and satisfy the need to share and live experiences, to experience the conference activities live.

As the philosopher Aristotle pointed out in his work *Politics*, man is a social being by nature³: “Man is, in fact, by his very nature, a social being, and he cannot live or display his qualities without relating to others”. The confinement, the social distancing, the closing of borders, all this annulled our social interactions and, with it, part of our essence as a country.

Beyond the important social point of view, on-site congresses have a strong economic impact on the cities that host them: direct and indirect benefits are generated in many business sectors related to tourism, such as catering, leisure, commerce and transport. The city as a whole benefits from congresses.

The development of vaccines against COVID-19 is generating a recovery of our social life, tourism is slowly coming out of the freeze imposed by the pandemic, sporting and musical events are beginning to present themselves to the public,

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and a return to face-to-face meetings is beginning to appear on the horizon. FacoElche 2021 has decided to defy uncertainties and insecurities and, with strong anti-COVID measures, has opted for face-to-face attendance, and this courage is to be applauded.

If conditions permit, for the Holy Year 2022 Santiago de Compostela will host the XXXI Congress of the Spanish Society of Ocular and Orbital Plastic Surgery (SECPOO) on 1, 2 and 3 June. It will be a good opportunity to learn and enjoy the company of your friends and colleagues: it's time to return to normality, it's time to return to face-to-face congresses.

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