

Virtual platforms as a vehicle to promote international collaboration



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This survey study was conducted to better consider ways that the Society of Maternal-Fetal Medicine (SMFM) can increase their international outreach. Most survey respondents indicated that international representation could be improved and cited barriers of cost and physical distance to annual meetings. This study highlights support for continuation of virtual conferencing to improve international representation and proposes a hybrid model of scientific engagement moving forward.

Key words: access, conferencing, international, representation, SMFM, virtual

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Introduction

The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine's (SMFM) Global Health Committee aims to “improve the health of women and children in underserved international communities” and provide global health opportunities for its members. Non-US-based membership within the SMFM was 8.7% (318 of 3665 members) in January 2018. Our objective was to assess perceptions and barriers to increasing SMFM's international representation. In the attempts to address identified barriers, we proposed a hybrid model of virtual and in-person future scientific meetings and networking opportunities.

Case Report

Between September 2018 and March 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, we surveyed current and prospective international members via e-mail about perceptions and barriers of international representation. We asked questions about their attendance to obstetrics and gynecology scientific meetings within their country and barriers to SMFM annual meeting attendance. We asked open-ended questions about what the SMFM can do to help international members and how they, in turn, could help the SMFM. One original e-mail and a follow-up e-mail were sent to members of the SMFM e-mail list.

A total of 84 respondents answered, two-thirds of whom were from low- and middle-income countries, as defined by the World Bank. Interestingly, 60 of 84

respondents (71%) believed that international representation was not enough within the SMFM. Although 72 of 84 respondents (86%) reported that they regularly attend their country's annual obstetrics and gynecology conference, only 14 of the 84 (17%) attend the SMFM's conference annually, and only 4 of those (5%) always attend the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics conference; cost and physical distance from conference venues prevented annual attendance. Additional responses are summarized in [Box 1](#).

Comment

Our findings highlighted challenges to increasing international representation within the SMFM, with cost and physical distance from conference venues being the most cited barriers to engagement at annual meetings. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted the way that conferences are hosted, but we argued that there is an opportunity for growth within societies like the SMFM, hoping to increase international representation that will continue to promote collaboration with research, promotion of early career pathways, and further global scientific knowledge. We proposed hybrid models to allow for both in-person and virtual participation and creative solutions to how we can exchange international collaboration. Additional practical solutions to increasing SMFM international membership are presented in [Box 2](#). Since the survey in 2018–2019, the

Box 1 Example responses from an SMFM international members' survey

How the SMFM can help you (n=64)^a

- Increased training opportunities
 - 31% (20): "Organize online and hands-on training on different topics worldwide."
- Sponsorship
 - 25% (16): "Sponsor attendance to annual meetings."
- Recognition of foreign expertise
 - 23% (15): "Provide better recognition of non-US doctors."
- Increased online presence
 - 6% (4): "Provide online facilities to watch recorded versions of conferences and courses conducted by the ISUOG or ESR."

How you can help the SMFM (n=76)

- Participation
 - 47% (36): "Form regional chapters or support groups for the SMFM."
- Research
 - 35% (27): "Create partnership and collaboration in research and education."
- Leadership
 - 14% (18): "Serve the SMFM Committees."
- International collaboration
 - 7% (6): "Liaise for international reach, participate in local support for fellowship exchange, and participate in research activities."

Data are presented as percentage (number).

ESR, European Society of Radiology; *ISUOG*, International Society of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynecology; *SMFM*, Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine.

^aThe percentage values may not add up to 100% because of the overlap of answers in free-text responses. Responses were generated by the respondents; the quotations are examples of the theme of responses mentioned in the bullet point above it.

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Box 2 Active initiatives and additional potential solutions for the SMFM to increase international membership

Previous or ongoing initiatives

- Free trial membership for 1 year for international members from LMICs (June 2020 to May 2021, 51 memberships sponsored)
- Free registration to virtual 2021 annual meetings for 50 members from LMICs
- Webinars on global health topics lead in collaboration with international speakers from LMICs (offered, ongoing)
- Ambassador program within LMICs to promote SMFM opportunities
- Free SMFM membership for tier 4 individuals from low-income counties

Potential additional initiatives

- Discounted registration for future annual meetings for members from LMICs
- Voluntary sponsorship of membership fees by active SMFM members for prospective international members from LMICs
- Virtual networking opportunities or panel sessions hosted by SMFM leaders to discuss the benefits of the SMFM membership
- Continuation of virtual components to the annual SMFM meetings with live streaming available to members unable to attend
 - Opening session with a keynote to be promoted virtually live and free as a means to encourage engagement

LMICs, low- and middle-income countries; *SMFM*, Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine.

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proportion of international SMFM members has grown by 50.9% to 13.1% (619 of 4722), as of January 2020.¹

Other international organizations have had success through virtual platforms for academic engagement. For example, the International Society for Thrombosis and Haemostasis had 18,000 virtual registrants and 12,000 attendees at their annual meeting in 2020. The American Association for Cancer Research hosted virtually more than 61,000 registrants from 140 countries for their annual meeting in 2020.

Although quantity of participation is an important point, quality of

interaction is equally important. In-person interaction through networking provides enriching dialogue and socialization to promote collaboration and foster mentorship opportunities. Interestingly, some platforms offer virtual networking using a machine learning algorithm to match researchers on the basis of work style and collaboration interests.^{2,3}

With the growing uncertainty of when we will return to “business as usual,” we proposed that the global pandemic has created an opportunity to make conferences more equitable and accessible to all, in an effort to advance

scientific progress across all cultures and continents. ■

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