Editorial: Conference scientific committees-what do they do?

For the majority of us who attend scientific conferences regularly, there are only three points at which we consciously engage with the scientific committee: when we send our abstracts before the conference, share our slides and posters at the conference and when the committee is formally introduced to the conference audience. Beyond that, the role of the committee, and how it is navigated, is a mysterious 'black-box'. Despite the large number of international, national and local scientific meetings, there is paucity of literature on scientific committees[1]. Conferences are learning opportunities, but this is a frequently missed learning opportunity[2,3]. What can we learn from the experience of a scientific committee for a national professional conference?

The first annual conference of the Ophthalmological Society of Kenya (OSK)[4] provides a timely snap shot. This one-day conference was held on 30th November 2018 in Nairobi. The organizing committee appointed a core scientific committee of three (two thirds female), with the possibility to co-opt additional members. There is no standard guidance on the size of committees, and this number worked very well. Suitable criteria for membership advanced in the literature include; reputation among the scientific community; evidence of previous research engagement, such as research publications; ability to review scientific papers and previous participation in a scientific committee[1]. We found the following attributes to be invaluable: willingness to dedicate a significant amount of time to the work; access to communication media, being well-networked with the professional community, experience with oral and visual conference presentation; competency in information technology skill and an eye for diversity.

The main functions of the scientific committee were to: (i) assess abstracts submitted for the conference (ii) prepare a scientific program (iii) monitor the progress of the scientific program at the conference (iv) administer the best abstract awards. These functions are embodied within the broader context of organizing the entire conference hence the ability of a scientific committee to meet its tasks is critical to the achievement of the objectives of the conference. While the committee worked independently, accountability and feedback to the organizing committee was maintained. Close links were maintained with other committees of the congress as well. The budget committee for example facilitated the printing costs, hiring poster boards and purchasing awards. The conference organizer was on hand for logistics, such as organizing the congress space, sourcing for the required resources and updating the conference website. Regular joint meetings, group email, telephone conversations, WhatsApp group, Google sheets, and Skype communication strategies were valuable for ensuring smooth coordination.

The main responsibility of a scientific committee is to guarantee the scientific merit of the congress[5]. The quality and scope of the scientific content for both oral and poster presentations is a starting point. An all-inclusive approach with dedicated sessions for clinical, policy, public health, research and professional experiences was important for balance. As there were more than enough abstracts for oral presentation and very few poster presentations, flexibility was required - some presenters needed to change to poster presentations. Fortunately, this did not result in overt conflict.

The literature has identified expert engagement as an enabler for quality[5]. We found it necessary to consult with experts in the different thematic areas of the conference as we prepared the program. In selecting moderators and chairpersons for each session, we considered expertise, availability and inclusivity. Further, we ensured that persons with these roles did not double up as speakers within their session, as is best practice.

We had print copies of the conference program, but the abstract booklet and the feedback survey form were published on the OSK website. We argued three benefits for electronic distribution: to enable future reference by attendees, contribute to reducing the environmental impact of scientific conferences[2] and reduce the printing costs. On the other hand, print copies were of immediate use to the attendees who did not have constant access to internet facilities. We hope that we can progressively embrace a paperless conference in the future.

We learnt the need for inclusiveness of interests in all aspects of the congress, including the participants, the speakers, the session chair and moderators. We made effort to encourage diversity in terms of seniority, expertise, affiliation or background. We did not publish or share speaker slides on the OSK website, which reflects a level of exclusivity. It is envisaged that in future the slides will be available on the website in order to maximize access to the scientific content and influence practice.

The conference program ran smoothly and we did not experience profound challenges such as speaker cancellations. Although we had envisaged clear role

distinction[7], we noted an overlap in the roles of the session chair and moderator. Time constraints and the need for spontaneity may have contributed to this, but it did not result in any identifiable adverse consequences.

To help with time management, at the start of each session the speakers were reminded to keep to time limits. We had a digital stopwatch on a large screen prominently displayed for the presenters. A volunteer sitting directly opposite the podium carried a visible placard to alert the speaker when time remaining was only 3 minutes and 1 minute. A bell was rung upon expiry of the time. Despite these measures, many speakers had difficulty keeping to the allocated time limits. As this automatically affects subsequent sessions, session chairs need to be constantly vigilant to ensure that sessions end at just the right time[7].

We encountered a few technical problems with the audiovisual equipment, especially in the transition between platform speakers. Occasionally the computer would hang or the pointer would not work. These constraints are largely expected, therefore we would recommend arranging for a dedicated technician to be on stand-by.

We developed a criteria for the selection of best abstracts from the entire pool of abstracts submitted. The four criteria that we used were quality, relevance, importance and innovativeness, all considered in relation to the themes of the conference. A similar mix of criteria have been used in other scientific meetings of medical associations[8]. We recommend that committees carefully select the criteria for this task and these need not be the same at each conference.

We had three categories for best abstract awards, namely oral presentation, poster presentation and abstracts by residents. Awardees were announced during the closing dinner of the congress, and received physical tokens as awards. After the congress we received suggestions from participants - that documentary evidence of the awards, such as certificates or letters of commendation, would also be desirable. This can be considered in future meetings.

What is the punchline? The role of a scientific committee is more than gatekeeping to select the right abstracts. The committee can increase the value obtained from the conference. Scientific committees must be forward-looking and innovative to meet the needs of the scientific community. This will require momentum from all of us as we engage with conferences and conference committees.

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