

The side-effects of attending a Scientific Congress

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International Scientific Congresses are always very interesting to attend, as they not only increase ones' relevant scientific knowledge, but also expand the horizons of thinking - by exposing devoted delegates to novel pathways of approaching a scientific question and conducting research, and introducing new ways of presenting data. We are now senior Pathologists and are listing attendance in more than 100 Congresses in our Curriculum Vitae, however we still remember that first time we attended a Scientific Congress, or the early days of presenting with the hand-crafted rectangular slides, prepared days in advance, transported in bulky round slide-projector cases (disastrous falls with messing in the order, or upside-down slides were a frequent event then). Now, in the era of PowerPoint presentations, such narrations sound old-fashioned, but the value of attending a Scientific Congress still remains. Thus, via our positions as Heads of our Departments of Pathology in two major Medical Schools in Greece, we have often encouraged and facilitated young Medical Students and Pathology Residents to attend Scientific Congresses. Upon return, they are asked to present the highlights of the Congress during the Lab meeting. This is always an interesting session to attend, not only for the obvious scientific benefits, but also as an opportunity to discuss the optimal ways of presenting, mostly based on "what to avoid" advice. Herein, we have combined all we have known about presentations that can go bad for the audience, irrelevant to their scientific value, exemplified in a single case report.

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Case Report - Introduction

The information that an International Congress in Medical Sciences was going to take place at a town nearby drew the attention of a final year female medical student, as she was looking at the bulletin board of her Medical School. Without much thinking, she decided to attend, since it was a good opportunity to see how medicine was outside of the Medical School and explore the various aspects of medical world. Besides, the location of the Congress was close to the University she was attending and easy to reach by car.

On the scheduled day she started early in the morning, the trip was pleasant, and it took her only two hours to reach the destination. As soon as she arrived, she went directly to the Congress Hall in order to get familiar with the place, register, take the program and study the various topics of the Congress. She itemized the topics she wanted to attend and walked around to the Poster and Exhibition Sections. After lunch break, she walked into the designated room in order to attend the Oral Presentations on the topic of Pathology. After all she had a special interest in Pathology. By the end of the session some peculiar and apparently unrelated worrisome symptoms, such as blurred vision and reading problems, mental confusion, split attention and inability for mental concentration, appeared and distressed her a great deal. She was in a state of panic, wondering how so many health problems could arise only by attending one session. On her way back home, she tried to relax and upon arrival she went straight to the University Hospital and asked the advice of her Professors (Ophthalmologist and Neurologist). They promptly responded to her request and before physical examination, asked for a detailed history of the preceding events.

Case History

The narration of the history was as follows: All started when she walked in the Room of the Oral Presentation topics. The lights went down and the first slides appeared on the screen. The first shock struck her, when the speaker started talking with a kind of code and cited too many acronyms in his talk. It reminded her of the hidden messages transmitted by code signals, in the old war movies she used to watch when she was a young girl. Although she was an A-grade final year medical student with special interest in Pathology, she was unable to follow the speaker. She had a hard time to decode the abbreviations and at the same time to keep following the presentation, although she was familiar with some, such as DNA, ACTH, TSH, even CIN.

After the second slide she also realized that she had a great difficulty reading the text on the slides, although she was sitting on the fourth row of seats at the auditorium. Was it something wrong with her eyesight? It was a fact that the text was written in a single space, with regular, non-bold small-sized font, but she did not recall having such a problem before. So, starting to get worried about her eye-site, she made a mental note to visit an Ophthalmologist. The symptoms worsened with the next presentation, where the background of the slides was that of a landscape with graded shades, varying based on the time of the day the picture was taken. This background design along with the different colors of the text, the small font size and the variability in the intensity, led to blurred vision. No matter how romantic and tranquilizing the slides' atmosphere was, she made a note that the visit to an Ophthalmologist the sooner possible is a must.

As the presentation continued, two or three slides in a row showed a figure that reminded her of the picture of an air traffic map at rush hour, she had seen in an airplane magazine, during last

summer's vacation. How wonderful that trip was! Looking back she visualized herself walking through the paths of the various European historic ages and enjoying swimming in the Mediterranean coasts. Back to presence, however, and at a closer look at the slides, she realized that this "air traffic map" actually depicted the many different signaling pathways, in the form of arrows in all directions interspersed with acronyms or abbreviations of regulatory molecules. This confusion was intensified by the fact that a "dancing" laser pointer kept destructing her, thus she understood nothing despite paying close attention. Worried about her mental state she made a note to also visit a Neurologist, as soon as she returned back home. Being optimistic by nature, she decided that noting the references that appeared at the bottom of some slides and search them later at PubMed, could retrogradely aid her to catch up with the subject of the presentation. So she dutifully wrote them, as they appeared on the slide, i.e. the name of the first author followed (rarely), by the "et al.", sometimes the year of publication and occasionally the title of the journal. Soon she realized that this information was inadequate and probably useless. For example, when she searched the name Jiang Y. in the lab top she always carried with her, the yield was 19297 articles. Customizing the date range to 2013, the yield was lowered to 1515 articles. She estimated her condition as desperate and made a mental note to also visit a psychologist.

Finally, the presentations ended and a warm applause for all speakers followed. But the martyrdom of our attendee medical student was not over yet. Relieved she raised to leave the

room, but the questions to the speakers started, so she had to sit again. The final realization she remembers from that session is that a simple question is as difficult as a hard one. It is even more difficult to give a simple and relevant answer, without merely repeating half of the presentation. Of the five questions that were made by the audience, the speakers answered four and she understood only one answer. One question was not answered, after being rephrased five times, because the speaker could not understand the question.

Final Diagnosis

Based on her symptoms, the ophthalmologist run some tests and diagnosed that there was nothing wrong with her eyesight. He concluded that the blurred vision and reading problems were most probably triggered by the size and intensity of the letters on the slides, as well as by the artistic intervention of the speaker expressed on the slide background. He also confessed that he himself regularly experiences the same symptoms at Conferences.

As for her neurological functions and mental state, the consulted Neurologist and Psychologist, after taking the patient's history and making some elucidative questions reassured her of her excellent mental health. They explained that the use of laser pointer in a monotonous and unnecessary way or in the hands of a nervous speaker (that happens quite often) can be hypnotizing or can disturb the attention, and that the simultaneously deciphering of too many acronyms and following the presentation is rather impossible.

Note

Dancing pointers, preachers, sweating slides and other distractions during talks. "By Caveman"

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