A New Era in Clinical Ophthalmology Education- is the Virtual Platform the Way Forward? *Our experience in international conferences in virtual platforms*

Christina Lim,[1] Chung Shen Chean,[2] Huzaifa Malick,[1] Antonella Berry-Brincat,[1] Raghavan Sampath.[1]

1. Department of Ophthalmology, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, Infirmary Square, Leicester, United Kingdom. LE1 5WW. 2. Department of Ophthalmology, Northampton General Hospital, Cliftonville, Northampton, United Kingdom. NN1 5BD

1. Introduction

The rapidly changing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected healthcare provision, clinical research, education and professional training.[1-3] Conferences have long been an integral part of postgraduate learning, forming crucial opportunities for professionals to learn from each other whilst sharing ideas and results.[4] Having the vast majority of such conferences cancelled due to the pandemic has led to essential changes to the approach of running an international conference, from traditional in-person conference to a virtual conference. Running smaller educational endeavours virtually has been accepted as an alternate medium of educational provision in several studies[4-6]. However, little data exists on both the feasibility and feedback of running an international specialist conference in a virtual manner.[7-9] We aimed to present the feedback from our delegates for the two live virtual international oculoplastic conferences organised during the pandemic.

2. Methods

2.1 Conference details

- The two virtual oculoplastic international conferences were organised by a team of oculoplastic surgeons and were held on the 14th of June and the 30th of August 2020 in the United Kingdom (UK). The participating countries were India, Singapore and the UK. They were supported by Asia Pacific Society of Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Oculoplastics Association of India, Singapore Society of Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive surgery and the Royal College of Ophthalmologists.
- No prior registration was required as both conferences were free of charge.
- The topics covered were "Lid, Lacrimal and Orbit" and "Ocular Adnexal Oncology" respectively in the form of lectures, expert opinions and case reports.
- The video conferencing platforms employed were Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc, San Jose, CA, USA) and YouTube (Google, Alphabet Inc, CA, USA).
- The speakers' presentations and their appearances were live streamed with a chair co-ordinating the session.
- Delegates were able to interact with speakers and ask questions during the allocated Q&A session.

2.2 Survey development

- Following each virtual conference, we have asked the delegates for online feedback on various aspects of the experience. This was performed using Google Forms® (Google Inc, USA). For both conferences, we have asked the same questions to ensure consistency.
- We were particularly interested in:
  - the location at the time of attendance
  - how easy it was to interact with the speaker
  - any technical difficulties.
  - if they felt the virtual format could replace face-to-face format
  - if they were willing to attend another virtual session.

3. Results

There were approximately 600 delegates in each virtual conference. We collected feedback from 133 and 229 delegates from conferences held in June and August 2020 respectively (**Table 1 and 2**). We found that the majority of delegates were attending the conferences from home (96%, 92%). They felt it was easy to engage with the speaker during the session (81%, 74%) with only few technical issues. Although the majority of them were willing to attend another virtual session (97%), just over half of them expressed that they would like to see a combination of both virtual and face-to-face formats in the future (59%).

Several aspects of the virtual conferences were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale anchored at "1=poor" and "5=excellent" (**Table 3**). In general, the delegates were satisfied with the quality of the conference but felt that the length of the sessions could be improved.

Table 1. Numbers and percentages of responses from the feedback in June 2020

Location		Was it easy to engage with the speaker?			Was there a technical difficulty?		Could virtual format replace face-to-face?			Willing to attend another virtual session?		
Home	Work	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Yes	No	Mix of both	Yes	No	Maybe
128 (96%)	5 (4%)	108 (81%)	7 (5%)	18 (14%)	11 (8%)	122 (92%)	40 (30%)	14 (11%)	79 (59%)	129 (97%)	0 (0%)	4 (3%)

Table 2. Numbers and percentages of responses from the feedback in Aug 2020

Location		Was it easy to engage with the speaker?			Was there a technical difficulty?		Could virtual format replace face-to-face?			Willing to attend another virtual session?		
Home	Work	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Yes	No	Mix of both	Yes	No	Maybe
210 (92%)	19 (8%)	169 (74%)	13 (6%)	47 (21%)	33 (14%)	196 (86%)	74 (32%)	21 (9%)	134 (59%)	222 (97%)	0 (0%)	7 (3%)

Table 3. Satisfaction scores on the quality of conferences

	June 2020		Aug 2020	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Was the length of the session adequate?	3.6	3	3.6	4
Was the topic suitable for a virtual session?	4.7	5	4.6	5
Were the sessions useful?	4.7	5	4.6	5

4. Discussions- Suggestions for the future

The Advantage

From our experience, the biggest benefit for participants was the flexibility without compromising the learning experience. The delegates attended the international conferences from home and were able to learn from international experts live, with the opportunity to interact with them real time. This naturally leads to reduced cost of attending educational events such as reduced conference fee (although ours were free of charge) and no travel cost. These advantages are well reflected in our delegates' responses.

Disadvantages

One drawback we gleaned from our results was that the delegates found the length of sessions too long although the conferences were only 4 hours each. This may be due to these sessions being held during the weekend. Although there were no major technical issue which delayed sessions timing and the sessions stayed largely on time, we have learnt that for these international virtual conferences, we need to pay extra attention to timing to allow adequate breaks and meals to accommodate multiple time zones.[9]

The Future

Over half of them would like to see a combination of both virtual and face-to-face teaching methods in the future. This could be attributed to different learning styles of individuals and perhaps some may find that home environment is not best suited for learning (e.g. noise, distraction from other members of the household). Furthermore, learning and collaboration are better achieved through mutual two-way exchange.[10,11] Purely virtual conferencing model cannot replicate face-to-face networking and some delegates therefore disliked the resultant lack of natural speaker-audience interaction compared to real-life lectures.[12] For a big audience, this is currently difficult to achieve since it is impossible to show the physical appearances of all delegates on one screen. Therefore, it becomes difficult for the speakers to gauge audience engagement hence resulting in suboptimal attention from them.[5,13] Nonetheless, the benefits and potential for virtual learning platforms are vast and we should continue to utilise it after the end of the pandemic.

References

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