Statement of policy

How is the annual congress of your society managed? (Reflection on the ethics and finances of medical congresses)

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Justification for scientific congresses

In spite of the enormous unlimited availability of printed and electronic journals there is increasing interest in the scientific quality and organization of medical congresses. If a congress is formulated to a high scientific standard, then participants in a few days of a full immersion receive up-to-date and reliable information. To achieve this it is essential that medical associations have in place proper strategies to ensure that their annual congresses provide value for money with respect to continuous medical education.

In the present economic situation there are a number of important drawbacks to the organization of medical congresses. Most individuals are unable to afford the cost of attending a congress unless in receipt of some support from his/her institution, from research funds, or from private sponsors. Can this cost be justified by a cost/benefit ratio? This question is important, not only for acceptable attendees and health institutions, but also for Governments which indirectly contribute financially.

It can be considered that the importance of a scientific association can be measured by its capacity to organize successful scientific meetings and by the influence that these congresses exert on the associated industry operating in the particular discipline. In many instances industry not only manufactures commercial products, but also contributes significantly to research for the advancement of drug therapy and medical technology. In spite of this, industry will only support the cost of a congress if the congress itself is considered rewarding because of its scientific content or because the large number of participants help the sponsor increase its image.

Financial aspects

Is there a way to guarantee to the members of a scientific association and their sponsors that the money invested in a congress is well used?

Usually the governing bodies of scientific associations consist of scientific experts, not of congress managers. In view of this the responsibility of organizing and executing every practical activity concerning the congress is given to professional congress organizers (PCOs). The fees such organizers charge for their work, and especially for their know-how and expertise, is usually very high and represents a large fraction of the overall cost of a congress. If an association could save on these large costs, then they would be able to lower the cost of participation in the congress or alternatively use the congress income to finance cultural initiatives such as research grants and educational courses.

The PCOs provide services not only to the association organizing the congress, but to the participants such as hotel bookings, travel arrangements, bus transfers, social events, etc. The PCO works in a situation of a virtual monopoly and examples of where such privilege has been mis-used are not unknown. The damage which can be done to an association can vary from minimal (a little discontent in the participants which somehow diminishes the image of the association) to a major effect such as when a short-sighted businessman takes advantage of every opportunity to overcharge without caring about the client’s satisfaction.

Rationale for societies to organize their own congresses

There are certain advantages for an association to directly manage its own congresses. The preparation of a congress requires a good deal of background information regarding the numbers likely to attend. In addition it is necessary to consider such factors as the required support with respect to registration and other organizational features. If a different PCO is employed every year underestimation and overestimation are more likely to occur because each association has its own particular peculiarities.

The ERA/EDTA council view of annual congresses

The intention of the ERA/EDTA Council when it decided to manage directly the organization of the annual congresses was to control costs and to establish a certain standard of continuity. This was a decision of no minor importance as it involved changes in the
constitution and the creation of an in-house congress office. Now that this has been achieved it is important to be aware of the differences from that which occurred previously.

The ERA/EDTA now controls the entire cash flow of the congress. In the past the PCO was responsible for the entire administration of the event and received all payments, paid bills, and only after all the accounts were finalized (which normally took several months) they provided the association with a balance sheet and the final net income. Now the congress cash flow commences with the first early registrations and this can be used immediately by the association.

ERA/EDTA has now developed its own expertise and know-how and so it is no longer necessary to buy this from an expensive PCO. We now purchase only the services we require and we no longer have to purchase the most expensive service of all: administration and decision making. Decisions are made by our own internal team on the basis of previous experience and previous mistakes.

ERA/EDTA Congress Office

The ERA/EDTA Congress Office is a multifunctional secretariat whose duties require versatility and flexibility. The workload changes dramatically during the different phases of a congress, from initial preparation to final accounts. A wide range of activities must be performed and the staff consist of five employees working as a team, although nominally assigned to different fields. Each member of staff works in three or more fields and at least two persons work in each field to ensure continuity. The office deals with the following activities.

1. Membership and relations with the publisher.
2. Planning and budget analysis.
3. Relations with companies.
5. Editorial activities.
6. Exhibition management.
7. Promotion of membership and congress.
8. Administration.
9. Handling of abstracts.

All these activities are tightly connected. Integrating the work of the five employees represents the rationale adopted to optimize cost effectiveness. As an example, granting a lower registration fee only to members that have actually paid their membership subscription would not be possible if the membership status could not be checked on-line through a computer network. The regular exchange of information between members of staff dealing with membership subscription, congress exhibition and registration make it possible for instance to measure the ‘weight’ of a certain sponsor by combining information on participation in the exhibition, the number of delegates it has registered, and the membership fees that it has sponsored. All five members of staff are available at every stage of the congress preparation to assist the congress President in his duties.

The person responsible for the congress editorial activity provides know-how and secretarial assistance to the Chairman of the Paper Selection Committee, who, according to the rules of the association changes every 3 years. The accumulated experience of the congress office staff makes the tasks of the Chairman of the Paper Selection Committee much more easy. In addition receiving the congress abstracts at one single address allows the simultaneous electronic performance of three parallel activities.

(a) Page making of the abstract section of the special congress issue of NDT.
(b) Page making of the abstract book.
(c) Preparation of the list of authors and presentations for the complete congress programme.

This has saved significant time, money, and effort with respect to the preparation of the congress programme.

One member of the team devotes most time to the management of the industrial exhibition together with budget analysis, site inspections, and direct supervision of certain services provided by local suppliers.

Promotional activities

Promotion is predominantly through mail-shots. The congress office has a list of Nephrologists from around the world containing more than 40 000 individual addresses. This is continually updated and cross-checked so that the list may be as current as is practically possible. As a consequence of this the association has gained a net increase of about 400–500 new members each year for the last 5 years.

Due to the high cost of mailing, any new initiative of ERA/EDTA including promotion of new membership is advertised in one mailing/year, i.e. a booklet containing the annual congress announcement with a print run of 40000 copies. The graphic design of this congress announcement and call for abstracts is altered each year to reflect some aspect of the centre holding the congress. The contents are carefully reviewed to reduce the number of pages and weight of paper to limit the cost of mailing whilst at the same time providing complete and clear information to achieve maximum promotional effectiveness. The congress office has now gained significant experience in the production of such booklets.

In addition to annual mail shots the ERA/EDTA promotes itself and its congresses through its home page on the Internet.

Handling of local revenue and expenses

The handling of travel costs, hotel reservations and other services that must be provided locally are directed by an experienced manager who works full time for
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the association. The philosophy behind this is to control the cost of air fares and hotels so that the association is in a position to offer the cheapest available price to those who address their requests to the ERA/EDTA Congress Office whether as individual members or companies.

This organization offers some clear advantages of which the following are two examples.

1. The income from registrations and industrial exhibition is immediately available for the association. The calculated return obtained only from the bank interest due to early cash flow is no less than $40,000 per congress.

2. The Council is kept updated by the congress office with regard to the real number of congress registrants, real hotel booking, and rented exhibition space. This information can be of vital importance in particular circumstances. In the Spring of 1997 the worrying news about the situation in Israel forced the Council to reconsider the venue of the congress which had been scheduled for September that year. The dramatically low figures for pre-registration, reservation of exhibition space, and actual hotel bookings enabled the Council to evaluate the reaction of the association members and industry to the news coming from Israel.

Conclusion

The policy of low congress registration fees, reasonable hotel prices, and significantly discounted air fares are a basic ethical issue for ERA/EDTA. This, however, can only be achieved by making certain choices with respect to congress management, such as limiting or cancelling social events, which are non-essential but significantly increase congress costs.

At the same time ERA/EDTA is investing its financial resources mainly in the journal Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation, the Registry, and providing a variety of grants. It should be stressed that the ERA/EDTA Registry is the only international registry operating on a voluntary basis which is entirely supported by a private association.

In spite of high yearly investments to which must be added the current costs of running the association our efforts for a careful management of congress finances means that clinicians living in Europe can take part in the annual ERA/EDTA congress at a cost of $1000 to $1500 all included, i.e. registration fee, air fare, and 3 days hotel accommodation.

It is clear that a medical congress is only one of the possible instruments of a scientific association to be used to promote science and continuing education. However, it is also unquestionable that without any Government or public support a well-administered congress is the only possible source of income for a medical association, together with the income provided by membership fees. The detailed balance sheet of ERA/EDTA including the financial results of the annual congresses is published every year and distributed to all members as well as being available to anyone who asks for copies [1]. It would be beneficial to the members of every medical association to open a discussion on the financial management of medical congresses [2], and the way the profits of scientific associations should be used with the purpose of promoting a better use of financial resources for culture and science.

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References

1. ERA-EDTA Annual Report, 1996