Do world conferences live up to their promise?

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Thoughtful feedback is needed

This issue of *Injury Prevention* is scheduled for distribution at the 7th World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion in Vienna. Barring the predictably unpredictable quirks of publishing, each delegate will have received a copy. Many can still recall the first conference in Sweden 15 or so years ago, and some will have attended each successive meeting. The total of attendees, past and present, may now be large enough to begin to try to assess how well these biennial pilgrimages meet their goals.

There is no way to judge with certainty the success of a conference. Much may depend on the weather (awful in Montreal, delightful in Melbourne) or on which of our old friends showed up. One criterion for success is that held by the organizers: a good balance sheet, which equates to the number of attendees. But bigger is not necessarily better. Balance may be more important—fewer attendees from more countries. For example, this conference may have attracted a higher-than-usual number from some European countries. Viewing the world through the undoubtedly distorted lens of an editor, my impression has been that much of Europe is a desert when it comes to injury prevention. If it proves true that many of the papers given in Vienna originated from those desert lands, this would be one positive score.

Still, total attendance may be an appropriate measure even if it is confounded by location, which, in turn, reflects cost considerations. Montreal is easier to reach than Delhi and who could resist Vienna except those with shallow pocketbooks. Apart from numbers and broader representation, the question that remains is what other criteria we can use to show whether such conferences are worthwhile?

Do large international meetings provide more than simply an opportunity to renew old acquaintances and to have precious one-on-one corridor conversations, invaluable as these may be? In what ways do they enhance the field, helping all who attend reach the shared goal?

One goal shared by many who attend is the hope that the conference will spur governmental action on injury control, at least in the host country, but preferably on a broader international scale. Thus an element in some previous conferences is formulating a Declaration as was first done in Melbourne.¹ These are truly commendable and thoughtful statements about what needs to be done. But it is difficult to discover whether they actually change policies or programs at any level: international, national, or local. This would be a valuable research project, but I fear the results may be disappointing. And, even if my pessimism is misplaced, Declarations alone cannot justify holding these conferences.

A second obvious goal of world conferences is to facilitate an exchange of information. Thus, abstracts are submitted for presentation in some form or other. The selection process involves review by scientific peers who, in my experience, are diligent and work hard at a largely thankless job. But it would be foolish to pretend that this review is comparable to the scrutiny applied to papers submitted to any peer reviewed journal. With the best of intentions, forming a judgment on the basis of an abstract alone, is a flawed and frustrating exercise. Even if there were not a premium on accepting most submissions to encourage attendance (as there clearly is for these international conferences), there remains much room for error. A few are false negatives—rejections of what later prove to be good work. These will eventually get published, so the harm done is minimal. A

far more likely and more serious risk is the many false positives—that is, papers that are accepted that do not deserve the imprimatur of true peer review. At least half of all papers presented at scientific meetings are not subsequently published in peer reviewed journals.² No matter how conscientiously abstracts are screened, until a paper presented at a conference is published in a peer reviewed journal, we cannot be certain of its scientific credentials. This means that listeners should take what they hear with a large grain of salt.

What are some other criteria for success? Following the Fifth Conference (Amsterdam) John Langley wrote a provocative commentary suggesting some areas where we can do better and others where we do well.³ On the positive side he listed the expansion of simultaneous translation which helps overcome the language barrier that plagues so much international work. On the debit side, Langley suggested that we look more critically at the quality of invited lectures, state of the art presentations, and plenary sessions. He also expressed surprise at the small European contingent in Amsterdam. If the same applies to Vienna, my optimism about the European desert finally blossoming will have been misplaced. (For the record, *Injury Prevention* has published many papers from the UK and Sweden, a few from several other European countries, but none from most others. The reason for this remains a mystery. Perhaps countries like Germany, Austria, or Switzerland prevent most injuries and have no reason to study the problem further!)

In his critique, alongside complaints about travel costs, banquets costs, the food served, and scheduling important sessions for 7 pm, Langley expressed disappointment with the quality of the plenary sessions. He felt that broad sweeping speeches by senior people in the field providing general overviews convey little new—or useful—information. He also suggested that posters be invited alongside oral presentations. In part the goal was to reduce the perception that posters are consolation prizes, but also because he thought this a better

Table 1 The Langley proposals (paraphrased)

- (1) Devote only one half day to plenaries (delivered by leaders with vision and ability to challenge the audience).
- (2) Develop better criteria for acceptance of abstracts and encourage parallel posters.
- (3) Oral papers should be mainly research or programmatic.
- (4) Distinguish between proffered paper sessions, symposia, and roundtables.
- (5) Ensure a core of all traditional streams.
- (6) Encourage pre and post conferences.
- (7) Organize more state of knowledge and sessions on specific issues.
- (8) Reduce costs.

form of communication. It appears no one has yet taken this suggestion seriously.

Another proposal was that oral sessions be separated between those intended for researchers and those for program persons. I disagree. Painful as it must be to have to engage in "cross-over listening", in the end this should prove beneficial. Researchers need to be confronted with the practical concerns of program folks and the latter need to understand the broad stroke scientific issues.

Lest this editorial appear to be overly critical, there are many traditional elements that are positive and should be continued. For example, these meetings are a great way to energize newcomers. To foster this new generation, more senior citizens should attend and present their work. The networking aspect cannot be underestimated: a large contingent of attendees creates opportunities to meet many needs as well as opportunity for face-to-face meetings with international collaborators who might not be able to afford to meet otherwise. Networking aids the subsequent exchange of information between relative strangers. Ideally this word

implies more than having drinks with old friends. I relish the opportunity to meet someone whose work I admire knowing that when I do so, reading that person's work in the future will have an added appeal.

Like journals, we need to recognise that broad spectrum conferences are challenging because they compete with specialized meetings, for example, road safety, occupational, suicide. The task is twofold: to ensure that the common elements are highlighted and to help those who work in several different areas or for which there is no subject specific meetings (for example, child injury).

Langley's critique and closing prescription could serve as a benchmark for assessing this and future conferences. Those who disagree with these suggestions are invited to submit their own. World conferences are too important to leave to the organizers alone. I know how hard they work and how devoted each team has been. I also know how seriously they take the detailed feedback from previous conferences. But each conference is likely to be the organisers' first and only experience in this endeavor. We need a better

system for ensuring that these meetings continue to improve and for this to happen, more thoughtful feedback and critiques are bound to help. *Injury Prevention* would welcome receiving such reports and we will do our best to publish them. We also encourage letters to the editor on this topic.

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- 2 **Carroll AE**, Sox CM, Tarini BA, et al. Does presentation format at the Pediatric Academic Societies' annual meeting predict subsequent publication? *Pediatrics* 2003;112:1238-41.
- 3 **Langley J**. International injury control conferences: surely we can do better? *Inj Prev* 1998;4:247-8.

The following statement from the World Association of Medical Editors has been endorsed by the editorial board of *Injury Prevention*: Geopolitical Intrusion on Editorial Decisions

Decisions to edit and publish manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals should be based on characteristics of the manuscripts themselves and how they relate to the journal's purposes and readers. Among these characteristics are importance of the topic, originality, scientific strength, clarity and completeness of written expression, and potential interest to readers. Editors should also take into account whether studies are ethical and whether their publication might cause harm to readers or to the public interest.

Editorial decisions should not be affected by the origins of the manuscript, including the nationality, ethnicity, political beliefs, race, or religion of the authors. Decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside of the journal itself.

Editors should defend this principle, as they do other principles of sound editorial practice, and enlist their colleagues' support in this effort if necessary.

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