

Conditions of practice may have to change to help allow these developments. The National Health Service pays dentists for how much dental treatment they give and not for the time spent practising communication skills. Different ways of charging patients for dental services may have to be considered. Such changes, which are already being organised by some dentists, and others that will include dentists' advertising their services should be welcomed as opportunities to modify public attitudes to dentistry, attract and retain reluctant patients, and thus improve dental health.

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Wanted: reader friendly posters

As much show business as science

At conferences these days doctors frequently have to absorb more information from the posters than from the podium. Too often poster makers have little imagination, although the tools available have improved greatly.

Most conference previews are submitted with oral presentation in mind,¹ and the suggestion that one has been accepted as a poster may come as a shock, possibly a disagreeable one if a poster presentation is regarded as less prestigious than an oral one. But disappointment could be avoided if conference organisers clearly stated their acceptance criteria for posters; these could include non-controversial presentations with clear cut results or technical descriptions demanding individual discussion. Subjects that require group discussion or many slides should then be accepted for oral presentation.

Many poster makers think that observers can read 107 complete scientific articles during the coffee breaks. Conference organisers seem to have the same idea—for example, one recent set of instructions reads: "Organisation of the poster along the guidelines for the abstract is encouraged—that is, title, purpose of the study, methods, results, discussion." What the reader really wants is the message, some evidence, a helpful title, no abbreviations or unexplained terms, large properly spaced lettering, and the data in pictorial form, not complicated tables. The test of a good poster is whether the material can be absorbed within two minutes. Other tempting aspects include a pleasing and colourful layout; an obvious sequence to follow; matt photographs rather than light reflecting glossy ones; a handout for references and technical details; and perhaps an imaginative

touch, such as extra lighting, a working model, or something in relief.

Thus poster makers should think as much about show business as science. Usually they have to be their own designers, but good advice is to be found in the book by Reynolds and Simmonds² and today computer graphics with different fonts and type sizes and a laser printer make things easier. In addition, portability calls for small sections that can be put together (perhaps in relief), often on a background that can be rolled up in a plastic carrying tube. The conference organisers should help by stating not only the height and width of the poster boards but also the background colour, the background material, and how the poster is to be fixed, for which they should provide the material.

Finally, one member of the scientific committee should be in charge of all aspects of the poster display, being prepared to pass constructive criticism to the authors of the posters that fail to deliver their message. On a vote by the conference there could be a prize for the worst poster as well as commendation for the best—with reasons stated for both awards.

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