MEDICAL PRACTICE

*How to do it***Organise an international medical meeting****I: Committees and budgets**

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At some time in his professional career a doctor may be concerned with organising a medical meeting. Meetings range from large international ones to small local gatherings, but the principles for organising all of them are the same. The object of our six articles in this series is to state these principles, to expand on topics that are often alien to the medical mind, and to point out some of the pitfalls that may trap the unwary and uninitiated. The principles are simple, and some of the things we say will seem obvious, but the obvious is often overlooked merely because it is simple. In these articles we shall be discussing committees, budgets, scientific and social programmes, registration, and other aspects of medical meetings.

The committee

The organising committee must be carefully chosen by the chairman. This working group of people will have various tasks allotted to them, many of which will be time-consuming. It is important, therefore, to allot duties to suitable individual members. If one member of the committee flies round the world every week it would be disastrous to give him a task that demands his frequent presence. Similarly, you should think carefully about giving some jobs to the young who have energy, and others to the mature who have tact. Each member of the organising committee should chair a subcommittee to co-ordinate the main activities.

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An important point in choosing the organising committee or some of the subcommittee members is to include lay people. Obtaining the help of someone in local government will smooth the path to official receptions, while the city manager or one of his senior colleagues on the committee will produce facilities and services that are invaluable to the meeting. Similarly, including a lay member who knows about finance and budgeting is imperative. If a trade exhibition is to be held, the help of someone in the pharmaceutical industry will keep that side of the meeting under control and add to the income. The chairman should appoint subcommittees for the following (with a member of the organising committee in charge): scientific programme; social programme; finance and budgeting; audio-visual aids; ladies' programme; publicity, advertising, and trade exhibition; and transport and hotel accommodation.

The organising committee should give a definite remit to the subcommittees, which should report to the main organising committee formally at the main monthly meeting. It is perhaps obvious, but minutes of all these meetings should be kept, and outstanding actions and promises not carried out rectified immediately by the chairman. Your organising committee should be like the board of a company, whose sole business is to run a successful meeting, ideally at a profit—but certainly not at a loss.

Financial aspects of meetings

Many doctors take fright at the words "finance" and "budget." These aspects, however, are becoming more and more important for a successful meeting, especially as costs rise. Our object is not to tell you how to raise money or what to do with it, but rather to guide you towards good management of your financial affairs. When faced with a medical meeting you must ask yourselves, "can we afford it?" and, if the answer is yes, "How can we organise the financial resources to make the meeting excellent?"

The money side of a meeting should be regarded in the same

way that a housewife looks at her housekeeping. She knows how much the goods are in the shops and she knows how much money she has in her purse. By wise buying and shopping around she gets value for her money. She, in fact, works out the household budget.

Making up a budget

A budget is simply a plan of action expressed in money. Essentially, the budget should state how much money is going to be spent and how much money is going to be brought in. Indeed, such an exercise can produce only three results: the meeting will make a profit, will break even, or will incur a loss. Judicial surgical intervention by making certain cuts in the budget can convert a loss to a break even, or a break even to a profit. The first responsibility of any committee is to construct a budget since all other aspects of the meeting are dependent on this.

CASH IN

The various sources of money at a medical meeting are direct registration fees; donations; and trade exhibition. Of these, only direct registration fees are completely under the control of the organising committee. Charge too much and you will dissuade many from attending. Charge too little and you may incur a loss. To be certain of viability, therefore, at least 60% of your total income should come from this source. How can you forecast how many people will attend the meeting? Past history helps, together with national or current international financial climates. It is important to remember that what may appear to be an excessively high registration fee for someone in Britain may be average or even cheap for someone abroad. The proportion of overseas to home delegates, therefore, could influence the setting of the registration fee.

Donations may be classified as coming from internal or external sources. Internal sources come from the cash reserves of the initiating society or from local university or college sources. External sources consist of local government support from city or town councils, and perhaps even central Government if the meeting merits such funding. Donations may also come from local industry, which may or may not be allied to medicine, or from industry allied to the theme of the meeting, perhaps even from abroad. You should remember that donations in kind can be just as useful as a monetary donation. Providing a reception, for example, relieves the committee and the participants of cash transfers. Also important in saving money is waiving fees for the hire of a building or a lecture theatre.

The income from a well-organised trade exhibition can contribute substantially to a successful meeting, and we give details of its organisation at the end of this article. Participation by the drug industry, however, requires the courtesy of attendance by

the delegates at some time during the course of the meeting, and this is not always arranged.

CASH OUT

Services, buildings, people, and commodities have to be paid for. The expenditure side of the cash budget is readily controllable. The committee can set the amount of money that they are prepared to spend on certain parts of the meeting. A simple illustrative example is the entertainment laid on for the delegates. The committee may decide to be lavish, or austere. Nevertheless, when the budget is complete, the sum put in for entertainment may be increased to make thrifty entertainment pleasurable and lavish entertainment cut to make it allowable—or legal.

The sample budget illustrated in the table is taken from an article¹ describing the financial aspects of a large international meeting and lists the income and expenditure of that meeting. The figure obtained from that particular meeting for registration fees came to 65% of the total income: there was a surplus or profit of 16.7%.

Construction of budget

Responsibility for constructing the budget is a whole committee effort. Each member or chairman of a subcommittee group should be able to forecast the money needed at least for his own part of the scheme. Start with the list of sums that you will have to pay out. Remember that costs in a budget may be fixed or variable. Fixed means that, whether one person or a hundred turn up, the amount to be spent for that service is the same. Good examples of fixed costs are the hire of the lecture theatre, the projectionist's fee, translation facilities, telephone installation, and insurance. Variable costs depend on the number of people attending and include such things as meals, entertainment, and certain printing costs. It is extremely difficult to be dogmatic in describing fixed and variable costs because some services contain an element of both. Nevertheless, if you stick to the principle of thinking in terms of fixed and variable costs you will avoid the trap of preparing a budget where most of the expenditure is committed to fixed costs.

Having obtained the first estimate of expenditure on the budget, increase this figure by 10-15% to take into account the inflation that is likely to occur between the planning and the date of the meeting. Given that at least 60% of your income will come from registration fees you can work this out thus:

$$\text{Registration fee} = \frac{\text{total cost} + 10\%}{\text{No attending}} \times \frac{60}{100}$$

If the figure obtained is astronomical you will have to look again at the expenditure side of the budget and cut it until

Income		Expenditure			
	£		£		£
Registration fees:		Salaries	15.6	Sign printing	0.9
Members and temporary members ..	54.2	Office equipment	0.8	Printing in total	9.0
Guests of members	10.8	Telephones	1.4	Translation	16.6
Trade exhibition	23.2	Postage and freight	1.0	Rents and services	6.8
Donations	0.4	Stationery	0.8	Trade exhibition	6.2
Banquet	8.2	Insurances	0.9	Briefcases and badges	0.8
Bank interest	1.9	Expenses of setting up registration		Transport for delegates	0.8
Advertising	1.2	offices	1.3	Banquet	7.6
Sundry income	0.1	Expenses of setting up special		Ladies' social club	0.7
		office	0.4	Audit fee	0.8
		Staff travel	0.3	Entertainment	2.2
		Sundry expenses	0.4	Commemorative envelopes	0.3
		Input VAT not recovered	0.9	VIP expenses	2.0
				Hotel bookings not taken up	4.8
Total ..	100.0			Total ..	83.3
				Surplus or profit	16.7

you reach a tolerable level for the registration fee. If such a figure cannot be decided early on, the financial aspect of the meeting spells disaster. Remember that the figures supplied are only guestimates, and the sooner accurate estimates are obtained the better the budget will be. Indeed, the decision of "go" or "no-go" in a meeting can be worked out rapidly by using this formula. When a registration fee has been fixed for years you should be able to obtain an indication of viability by changing the figures in the given formula.

With regard to the income side of the budget, the forecasted number of people attending needs to be accurate to calculate what, in effect, is 60% of your total income. You can relieve this headache by fixing the number of people allowed to attend; this simplifies the budget considerably, but does not always lead to a successful meeting. If the attendance is not fixed, working on as accurate a forecast as possible, the income from 100% attendance on this figure can be calculated. Similarly, the income from 90% and 80% attendance can be calculated, hence giving you some idea of the money available which should be balanced by making cuts on the expenditure side. In the early stages the budget should be fluid and capable of being chopped and changed until a definite plan of action is decided. The final income and expenditure statement after the meeting should only confirm the budget. It should be like an x-ray film confirming a previously clinically diagnosed condition.

As we have said, repeated revision of the budget is necessary. It should be brought up to date monthly by the full committee, so that any disasters that are beginning to show up are avoided, or at least ameliorated. The weekly meeting allows pruning of the expenditure if income is not up to forecast or adding a refinement to the programme if the income is above budget. Allowances must be made for insurance in case the meeting has to be cancelled because of airline strikes, hotel strikes, or natural disasters that could affect the meeting. The committee should be prepared to pay up to 1% of the total cost of the meeting to get such cover.

One way money may be lost is in misunderstanding whose travel expenses and whose hotel bills are going to be paid by the meeting. The committee should define these invited guests, and include their expenses in the budget. Beware of the invited guest who always has caviar and champagne for breakfast and charges it on his hotel bill. Unexpected bills are always sent in—for example, the florist was paid direct for flower arrangements at the official opening and at the banquet. Someone may decide that microphones at the banquet would be useful, and forget that this has to be paid for. Buses ordered and not used have to be paid for, as have staff who stay on because a function overruns. Telephone accounts may come in long after the meeting and often more telephones are laid on or used than have been allowed for. Beware of the individual who asks to use the official telephone and who speaks for half-an-hour at a time with New York, Tokyo, or Sydney, without reversing the charges. Often a guaranteed income is given on bar and coffee takings, and, if this is not achieved, it will be necessary to make up that deficit.

In meetings in the UK the introduction of "value added tax" has added problems for the accountant. Certain items are subject to VAT and may be reclaimed, while sometimes VAT is payable but not reclaimable. Even corporation tax may rear its ugly head in certain circumstances. When the committee has to be concerned with VAT and corporation tax, professional help is necessary. When the time comes to pay bills, especially when they are large, you should ask whether a discount is available if you settle these accounts quickly.

Trade exhibition

When organising a conference, an important question for the committee must be whether or not to have a trade exhibition. The two main benefits are firstly that it can be a useful source of money to add to the budget income, and secondly that

delegates can apprise themselves of a wide range of information about many different products in a convenient and speedy way. Communication with the company representatives can solve problems and queries. If you decide to have a trade exhibition, certain conditions are essential for success:

(1) Committee and delegates alike must acknowledge its value and relevance by according courtesy and attention to the exhibitors and their displays.

(2) The exhibition space should be an integral part of the conference area, immediately adjacent to the lecture theatre, seminar rooms, or both, and large enough for its purpose.

(3) Morning coffee and afternoon tea, at least, and preferably lunch as well must be served in the exhibition area, which normally should also have registration facilities.

The organisation of the trade exhibition may be handed over to a company whose professional business it is to run exhibitions, in which case the "profit" from the exhibition will largely accrue to that company; or the committee may invite one of the exhibiting companies to organise the exhibition on behalf of the conference, for which only the expenses of the organiser will be charged and hence a bigger "profit" will go to the meeting.

To decide who is to run an exhibition, the committee must consider both the objectives of the conference and its scale. You will find it a considerable advantage to make the exhibition organiser an ex officio member of the conference committee, because this encourages closer liaison and a friendly working partnership.

When the organiser has been appointed, the committee should agree estimated financial figures with him. These will include such factors as the number of exhibitors who may be safely accommodated in the space available for the exhibition, and also the charge for a square metre of exhibition space. The committee should also, if possible, provide the organiser with lists of potential exhibitors to be invited. Beyond that, they should allow him complete autonomy, subject to periodical reports on progress at meetings of the committee (hence the advantage of his membership).

It is well to remember that a conference of any kind is a business occasion and all associated arrangements must be conducted in a business-like manner. This applies equally to the trade exhibition. While the exhibition organiser will deal with detailed arrangements, the committee should be aware of the main matters to be taken care of. These may be summarised as follows:

(1) *Space available*—Number of stands which can safely be accommodated; and need for adequate gangways to allow stands to be seen and to meet fire safety regulations.

(2) *Costs*—Costs incurred in mounting an exhibition are the rental of space, hire of furnishings and equipment, installation of temporary electric supply, electricity, and cleaning. These direct costs must be adequately covered by exhibition charges. In addition, participating companies will have their own costs covering stands, publications, samples, travel, accommodation, and salaries. The charge to the exhibitors, therefore, must be carefully worked out so that the direct costs do not exceed the total income from the sale of the exhibition space.

(3) *Timing*—Company staff who man exhibition stands will spend the greater part of any day hanging about. It is vital, therefore, to ensure that the length of time the exhibition is on display is related closely to the nature of the conference and the number of delegates. Far better to have a two-day exposure in the middle of a week's conference, than to expect exhibitors to stand around for days on end without a customer. One must also remember to allow time for setting up and dismantling.

(4) *Exhibition area*—Access for stands and equipment for display must be practical. Electricity supply must be adequate. Water supply and drainage may be necessary. Storage space for exhibitors' material before, during, and after an exhibition is essential. Security measures are often required so that valuable equipment is not stolen or broken.

(5) *Exhibition organiser*—He must be given authority to do his

job—and be left to do it. All matters relating to the exhibition must be channelled through him. He will collect and pay out all exhibition money, handing over at the end of the operation a net sum with an audited statement of income and expenditure, with the hope of producing a reasonable profit to the meeting to offset some of the outgoing expenditure.

Conclusion

The problems of running a large international meeting are legion and here we have attempted to outline only some of the

main financial aspects. The keys to success are accurate forecasting and tight budget control, coupled with a good accountant and a hard-working committee, meeting frequently, led by an understanding chairman. The final income and expenditure statement should only confirm the budget previously made. No one should be surprised, therefore, at the profit—or the loss.

Reference

- ¹ Capperault, I, and Reid, W, *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh*, 1976, **21**, 302.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Dog days

Because of their resemblance to the wolf, alsatians are widely assumed to have wolf blood in them. In fact the breed is a very pure and ancient one originating from the native sheep dogs of Germany. In 1889 a German cavalry officer, von Stephanitz, set up the first club and drew up standards for the breed that are still used today. The Germans used alsatians as messenger dogs and carriers of Red Cross supplies in the first world war. Some of these dogs found their way to England after the war, but the name German shepherd dog was changed to alsatian wolfdog because of anti-German feeling.

Despite all we had read about how to choose a puppy and how to check the pedigree, the ears, skin, and teeth, we still ended up with the probable runt of the litter. Once we had acquired our rather dubious specimen our eyes were opened to a new world of dogs. No day would ever pass without my having to take her for a run. Every day I streamed behind her in the wind, on the end of her lead; indeed a friend who once espied us likened me to a pennant on the end of a flagstaff.

It is amazing how when one does anything, be it buying a house or a car or applying for a job one meets many others similarly engaged. So it was in my daily outings I met and became friendly with a group of people likewise employed in exercising their dogs, and found myself in heated debate about dogs and their habits. Not long after she reached maturity I noticed, to my surprise, a trail of dogs following us home one day in some excitement. It took some time for me to realise that Kim was going into season. Life changed again. On drawing open our curtains for the next three weeks we were greeted by a bleary one-eyed basset, with a gammy front leg, whom my wife named Nelson. He took it upon himself to regulate all callers. He allowed in immediate family but took an extremely dim view of milkmen, tradesmen, and other vendors. Kim's strangest suitor, however, was a chihuahua, who always paused to cock his leg confidently against a blade of grass before jauntily approaching. Kim used to sniff him curiously, but then ignored him, as if she needed to satisfy herself that he was indeed a dog. Although we took numerous precautions, a canny labrador caught her one morning and nine weeks later she gave birth to seven labrador-alsatian puppies. Kim has long since gone, but I still miss her sorely. My wife insists that she has left an indelible mark on my psyche, perhaps because I gaze expectantly out of windows as Kim used to do, and occasionally bark at cats.—R E GOODMAN (general practitioner, Northenden, Manchester).

Sheep shearing

Sheep shearing is as old as humanity. One has only to remember the golden fleece, Jason's prize for arduous adventures. Together with corn, wine, and oil, a fleece was to be given for the sustenance of the Levitical priest (Deuteronomy xviii, 4). Sheep were everywhere on that wide borders countryside, that stupendous vale of Tweed leading down from Cheviots to the sea. We woke to their perseverant bleating and retired with images of their tranquil munching against the backdrop of the northern twilight.

That morning Shep and his assistant were injecting them against tetanus and rubber stamping them with bureaucratic efficiency. Next day we watched spellbound as their "cardigans" were stripped off, one by one. What skill in throwing the huge animal helpless on her

back; in the electric shaving that took the wool clean off in one unbroken piece; in the avoiding of any but the merest scratch of the belly; and in the tying together of the bundle by use of the neck strands.

I quoted Isaiah liii, 7: "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" to the shepherd, who seemed faintly amused. Perhaps even he had not noticed how utterly silent the animal was under the indignity, so different from her usual vociferous behaviour. How gallantly she tripped away naked, guarded by the ever-watchful eye of the placid dog. I shall wear my pullover with an even greater degree of gratitude in future, and when I am "fleeced" it will be a comfort to realise I am only one of thousands more deserving of sympathy than I.—S L HENDERSON SMITH (general practitioner, Huddersfield).

View from a bike

Motorists often tell me how healthy it is to bike to work, that I shall live longer than they will and stay slimmer, or how brave I am to tackle the London traffic and the elements—one thing they share in common is that they haven't tried it themselves. They don't ask how I surmount steep hills, avoid obnoxious fumes from undermaintained vehicles, or mend a puncture. I wondered how many of the nine contributors to *Cycling: the Healthy Alternative: Ten Reports to the British Cycling Bureau* (£4.50 from BCB, Stanhope House, Stanhope Place, London W2) practise what they preach, but there's plenty of sense in their reports, which, among other things, mention that road surfaces near the curb should be smooth; turning right is dangerous (nevertheless, you can push across at lights or pedestrian crossings); and survival depends on "defensive cycling." They suggest protective clothing and crash helmets, but don't mention overheating on hills (it's the sweat that puts us off crash helmets, not bloody-mindedness).

When I resumed biking (as bus queues lengthened) I donned cape, sou'wester, and wellies in the rain but almost immediately discarded them all. A cape billows in the wind restricting rear vision and arms—you can't turn handlebars or use an arm to indicate direction—or it may obscure your lights. A sou'wester accompanies your head as you bend over to avoid stinging rain but stays there when you raise it so that all you can see is the inside of the sou'wester. These clothes all make you hot and usually I opt for wet rather than sweat.

One report said that we leave our aggression behind with our cars, but even our hackles rise when our bicycle parks are sealed by large selfish cars, or a bad-tempered motorist cuts in front of us. Dr David Kerr, a London GP, was overenthusiastic about the joys of family outings and oddly, I thought, said wooing from the saddle of a slow-moving bike was more satisfactory than in a car. Dr Bernard Freedman quoted Tacitus: "It is astonishing how the mind is stimulated by physical exercise"; but I doubt if my fellow workers will agree that I arrive in the early morning able to bear the responsibilities of my job with "a certain relaxed optimism and buoyancy."

Why don't the reports suggest that lorries should have "Long Vehicle" written on their sides as well as their backs; why should anyone except bus-drivers object to us using bus lanes; and why can't manufacturers invent cheap lightweight anoraks that can be undone from the bottom upwards (as you get hotter)?—HEATHER WINDLE (London).