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Conference previews

A better term for the discredited conference abstract

The conference abstract has fallen into disrepute. Appointments and promotion committees are now antagonised by them on a doctor's list of publications, and some editors refuse to cite them, saying that they are "false science."¹ Abstracts may have been published without being accepted for presentation, and even if they were accepted the author may have failed to attend the conference. Abstracts will probably not have been peer reviewed, except by the conference organisers. Their content has been condemned² for lacking the information required in the conventional abstract in a scientific publication³—let alone a structured abstract⁴—and for lacking any data, giving the suspicion that the work has not been done at the time of writing.

I suggest that the conference abstract has been abused and put to unnatural uses because it bears a false name. It does, however, have two genuine functions. Its primary function is to convince the conference organisers that the author should be chosen to present his material at the conference, either orally or as a poster. Given that an abstract usually has to be submitted months before the conference, not unreasonably it may outline exciting work in progress, whose results will be ready for the conference, rather than completed work that authors may wish to submit elsewhere for publication before the conference. (They may also be mindful of the problems of multiple publication.⁵)

Secondly, the abstract is directed towards attracting participants to the conference and to the author's presentation. Hence it is in the nature of an advertisement or a preview for the organisers and participants and cannot be a complete paper for the wider world. Furthermore, between the submission of an abstract and the presentation of a paper the author may come to totally different conclusions about his results.^{1,6} He can explain such discrepancy to the conference, but how can he recant to the world at large if (as happened to me recently) the abstract is already in press or in print at the time of the conference⁷ and the editor refuses to correct matters by substituting a revised version or printing a definitive paper in a journal? Finally, the discussion at the conference often raises alternative interpretations or errors to which the author may wish to react. (For these reasons abstracts of papers given to the Physiological Society are not printed until the meeting has given its assent.) Many published abstracts are thus untrustworthy and hence disreputable.

The conclusion must be that the conference abstract is not an abstract in the sense used in a scientific paper; it should not be published except in the conference programme (which can be given an ISBN number to make it retrievable⁸) or cited without qualification. What is needed is a new name for it: "conference preview" is one suggestion, which should delude nobody.

If formal publication of the presentations is really necessary the conference organisers should arrange for full manuscripts to be submitted by a given deadline after the conference and for them to be properly peer reviewed—a procedure that will be carried out for the fifth international symposium on morphometry in morphological diagnosis. A definitive publication date should be announced, and all these intentions announced in the calls for presentations. There should also be a box on the preview submission form for authors to indicate their willingness or unwillingness to submit a manuscript after the conference.

Doctors who want to have a long curriculum vitae need not despair: they may include a sheet listing "presentations at meetings." Whether or not these ever turn into peer reviewed publications^{9,10} is irrelevant. Committees should not be irritated and should take the presentations on their merits. But in this way we can take "conference previews" away from the "rewards of science" system¹¹ and restore them to their limited but honest role.

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