Organise a medical symposium for general practitioners

David J T Wright

Many local and regional medical meetings for general practitioners take place each year. They are often organised by general practitioners who have never done such a thing before, and there is little published advice available. This is a simple guide on how to do it and includes a suggested timetable.

General principles

Start early. Good speakers, rooms, and caterers get booked up quickly.

Make sure you use fixed income (such as sponsorship) for fixed costs and number dependent income (such as registration fees) for number dependent costs. If you do not you may find yourself financially embarrassed.

As soon as you have produced your provisional programme, apply to your adviser in general practice or postgraduate dean for section 63 approval.

Make sure there is someone other than yourself to "front" the course on the day. You will need to be available backstage to sort out the inevitable hitches that will occur.

Theme and programme

Decide on the theme. You may have been given a very wide brief (for example, practice organisation) or perhaps no brief at all. The theme needs to be broad enough to allow for some variety of topics but narrow enough to keep the meeting focused.

Fix a date.

Produce a provisional programme. Sketch out time slots and pencil in topics to be covered, together with potential speakers. Try to get a balance between local and national (or international, if you can get them) speakers. Don't forget spots for opening remarks, summing up, and questions, and remember to include breaks for coffee, lunch, and tea. Consider varying the sessions: films, quizzes, and small groups can be put round the standard lecture by an expert.

Contact your speakers (see below). Don't forget to ask those you have put down to chair sessions.

Revise the programme in the light of response from speakers. Sometimes they will want to talk about something slightly different from what you had in mind. If they do not want to cover a point that you think is important you will have to ask someone else to cover that particular aspect.

Finalise the programme.

Venue

Usually the venue will be your local postgraduate centre. Check with the administrator that the centre will be available and confirm maximum numbers. Any other venue will probably mean considerable expense, but possibilities include rooms or conference centres in hotels and, out of term time, schools or colleges.

Speakers

Contact speakers as soon as possible to confirm that they are available on the day you want and are prepared to talk on a subject relevant to your programme. Local

speakers can often be contacted by phone, but national or international experts will need to be written to.

Confirm acceptance, whether it comes by post or phone, with a letter. Thank the speaker for agreeing to speak and confirm date, time, place, subject, length of talk, and fee. Mention what equipment is available and ask if any other equipment will be required. Say that you will be writing later with details of the programme and (if appropriate) a list of topics you would like covered.

Once the programme is finalised write to speakers again, enclosing a map showing the venue and a copy of the programme with their spot underlined. Spell out the important points you want covered and mention areas of potential overlap with other speakers. At this stage ask speakers to confirm when they plan to arrive, whether they will need transport from the station or airport, and whether they will be bringing a guest. If they are travelling long distances ask whether they will require overnight accommodation.

If there is a dinner in the evening you might want to offer the main speakers and their guests complimentary places. If so, invite them now.

Finance

There are three main sources of income: sponsorship (usually from pharmaceutical companies); section 63 funds; and registration fees. As an example of the sort of proportions to expect, the following is a breakdown from an actual meeting: sponsorship 53%; section 63 funds 8%; registration fees 39%.

Sponsorship can be sought through pharmaceutical company representatives. Most postgraduate centres have lists of representatives with contact addresses and phone numbers. If you contact the companies direct they will usually respond by suggesting that their local representative visits you at the surgery. Make sure you get confirmation in writing from the pharmaceutical companies of the amount of sponsorship they have promised.

Put together a provisional budget as soon as possible. Principal costs will be: speakers' fees and expenses; printing; postage and stationery; catering, including room hire for evening meal; and your own expenses—don't forget these, particularly phone costs and travel. All of these costs are fixed apart from the catering costs, which will increase as the number of people attending the seminar increases. It is very important that these attendance related costs are covered by the registration fee. If they are not you might find yourself in the sad position of losing money because of your success. If, for example, you are breaking even with 60 people attending and if the registration fees are £10 but the actual cost of providing coffee, lunch, and tea is £12 then every extra registration will cost you £2. Don't forget that meals taken by speakers, their guests, and any staff helping with the meeting will have to be paid for out of the fixed funds.

All the pharmaceutical companies who sponsor you will want recognition on the day. Usually they will want to set up a stand. Space for these can be quite a problem if you are relying on small contributions from several companies, and it needs to be planned carefully. Make sure that the programme contains an ack-

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nowledgment of the sponsorship you have received. As long as pharmaceutical products are not mentioned there are no strict rules about the wording. "We would like to thank [company name(s)] for their generous sponsorship of this meeting" or a similar wording would be acceptable. Also, ask the chairperson to encourage everyone to visit the stands as he or she sums up before each break.

Catering

You will know your maximum numbers early on as they will depend on the venue for the meeting, so arrange day catering (coffee, lunch, and tea) for that number. Cut down later on if necessary. The hospital may well be the best contractor to use, but you should get quotes from outside caterers as well.

An evening dinner may be more successful if it is held away from the hospital. Most medium or large hotels have a selection of dining rooms to suit gatherings of different sizes. You will have to estimate numbers. If the meeting is a regular event ask people who have organised previous years' dinners what numbers to expect. Make sure that all places finally booked have been paid for in advance so that if people fail to turn up at the last minute you won't be out of pocket.

Choose the menu as early as you can and decide what you are going to do about drinks. Will there be a "free bar"?—make sure you set a maximum limit with the bar staff. Will wine be included in the cost of the meal or be an extra payable individually?—try to get at least some wine included in the cost.

Consider a seating plan with a top table for VIPs and invited guests such as the speakers. People are happier if they know where they are going to be sitting, and it saves the undignified rush for tables. Always have a seating plan for large numbers (say, over 50).

Accommodation

Accommodation required by speakers should be arranged with local hotels and bookings confirmed in writing.

If people coming on the course ask you to arrange accommodation for them, you can simply give them the names of local hotels and ask that they sort it out for themselves. Your local tourist information centre can often provide lists of suitable places.

Publicity

The invitation that goes out to your target audience should consist of a covering letter, a copy of the programme, and an application form. The covering letter should explain who the meeting is aimed at and give an outline of the theme and topics to be covered. It should list all the speakers, together with their title and institution, and say whether or not the meeting has section 63 approval.

Give a deadline for applications. Even though most people will ignore it, it is useful to be able to quote when you really do have to turn people down because they are too late. It is also worth stating how many places are available, particularly if the numbers are restricted.

The application form should list options (such as symposium only, lunch, or evening meal) and costs, and should be drafted so that it is easy for applicants to indicate what combinations they require and how many places they need. Make sure it says to whom cheques should be made payable and where to send them.

National advertising is usually expensive. For example, a half page advertisement in the *BMJ* costs £780 + VAT (October 1989). Advertising in local

Timetable

Six or more months ahead

- Decide on theme
- Produce provisional programme
- Contact speakers and confirm availability
- Arrange sponsorship
- Find and confirm venues for symposium and meals
- Gets quotes from and book caterers
- Confirm section 63 status with adviser in general practice or postgraduate dean
- Book and confirm any special visits and entertainment if required
- Book accommodation for speakers if necessary

Three to six months ahead

- Finalise programme
- Confirm with speakers and readjust programme if necessary
- Confirm sponsorship and arrange layout of stands, etc
- Finalise menus and catering costs
- Print programme, covering letter, application form, dinner tickets

Two to three months ahead

- Send out application forms, programme, and covering letter
- Final confirmation and briefing with speakers
- Check availability of any special equipment needed

Four to six weeks ahead

- Send out second batch of application forms if necessary

Two weeks ahead

- Confirm "final" numbers with caterers
- Confirm arrangements for lunch (may need more than one sitting)
- Check table seating and arrangement for evening dinner
- Order flowers for evening dinner if necessary

Day before

- Get out cash for gifts and incidental costs

On the day

- Check equipment
- Check that section 63 forms are available
- Check that registration table is set up
- Check that pharmaceutical company reps are happy
- Welcome speakers (make sure refreshments are available)
- Be ready to sort out any problems that occur

medical magazines would be much less expensive. Posters in postgraduate centres are worth considering, and circulars can be distributed through the channels described below.

Printing

It may be worth paying for professional printing rather than using the hospital or practice photocopier. Try to get a pharmaceutical company to pay for the printing and distribution costs.

When you have decided on the venue for the evening dinner, have tickets printed to send to those who have booked and paid for the evening meal. They are useful

for defining the number of guests who have been invited or paid for and for stipulating what dress is expected.

Distribution

Family practitioner committees will send out your information to all principals in their areas, but the distribution tends to be infrequent. This method does not reach retired general practitioners or general practitioner trainees in hospitals. Postgraduate centres will send out copies to their local practices and will be able to supply general practitioner trainees as well. General practitioner trainees can also be reached by sending applications to course organisers.

The only simple way you can reach retired general practitioners is if they are still members of the local faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners. The faculty secretary will be able to provide you with a printout on sticky labels of names and addresses of all members and associates. The BMA used to provide a similar service but no longer does so because of the constraints of the Data Protection Act.

Consider sending personal invitations to local medical VIPs, particularly if they are associated with the organisation for whom you are arranging the meeting.

Confirmation of bookings

As applications come in they need to be confirmed. Your postgraduate centre administrator should be able to do this for you. Letters of confirmation should include a map and tickets for the evening meal or any other special event, if required.

Equipment

If unusual equipment is required by any of the speakers make sure this is available.

On the day check that the overhead projector, slide projector, video, and any other pieces of equipment are working. Do this early so that there is time to sort out any problems before the meeting starts.

Consider having someone available during the meeting to work the equipment.

Registrations

As people arrive they will need to be registered and given name tags. Your postgraduate centre administrator should be able to organise this for you.

Miscellaneous

Consider having flowers on the tables at the dinner.

Consider having stands other than the ones provided by the pharmaceutical companies for people to look at during coffee and lunch breaks, but only if they are relevant to your theme—for example, general practitioner computer system demonstrations would be suitable for a practice organisation seminar.

Don't forget gifts for any particular stalwart helpers (especially the postgraduate centre administrator).

Many speakers don't ask for any specific fee. In that case, average out what you can afford overall and pay flat rates to all the speakers, whether famous or not. Some speakers might prefer gifts, such as book tokens, rather than money.

Don't forget to have section 63 claim forms available on the day. It is a nuisance to have to post them all out afterwards.

Letter from Bombay

The autobiography of an unusual Indian

Sunil K Pandya

Indian medical doctors seem reluctant to record their lives and times. Diligent search yields but a handful of autobiographies. The announcement of a book written by the elder brother of the god of death therefore stirred curiosity.

In labelling the story of his life *Yamaraja's brother*, the Indian nephrologist Dr M K Mani meets admirably the requirements of a good title for a book—he captures our interest using a brief, witty, and learned term.¹

Facing the title page is the Sanskrit verse:

Hail to thee, O physician
brother of Yamaraja (god of death),
—elder brother, for Yama takes life,
whilst you snatch both life and money.

This mocking humour is encountered throughout the book. Take the sentence on page 5.

One would like to think that every one who takes this profession [medicine] is motivated only by a love for humanity and a burning desire to do good, to heal the sick and to alleviate suffering. There must be some who became doctors for this reason but I have not met any.

As a child Dr Mani had dreamt of becoming rich and famous, owning a Rolls Royce or two, and becoming the prime minister or — better — president in a presidential

form of government. Fortunately, as he quickly adds, he has never been a serious dreamer. His steps were directed towards the medical college by a charming young doctor who stayed as a guest with the family. His hero died young after an unhappy career.

Avid BMJ reader

We are provided tantalising glimpses of Dr Mani's forebears and teachers. He inherited a sense of discipline from his father, T M S Mani of the Indian Civil Service, and his teacher Dr K S Sanjivi—eminent physician and founder of the Voluntary Health Services organisation and medical centre in Madras. While secretary in the Ministry of Health,¹ Madras, Dr Mani's father read the *British Medical Journal* regularly to acquaint himself with what was going on in medicine. Dr Sanjivi was physician to the author's family. He was also professor of medicine at the college under the direct jurisdiction of Dr Mani. Called to examine the ill, young M K Mani, he politely declined to do so till he had attended to his patients at the general hospital. That he and the family considered this natural speaks volumes for the ethos of the time. Today many physicians drop everything to rush to the homes of powerful politicians or bureaucrats to attend to their

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