Hurley Group, London

clare.gerada@nhs.net

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WOUNDED HEALER

Clare Gerada: Zoomed out

Clare Gerada *GP partner*

I've delivered many public lectures during this pandemic—probably more than in normal times. All but two have been virtual (and those two were a mix of real and online). The transition from stage to screen has been interesting and at times difficult.

Firstly, the setting. A live audience enlivens the atmosphere. By contrast, staring into a blank screen—at one's own face or uniform blank boxes—does nothing to stimulate the artistic juices. While the participants can multitask (even cook supper) with their cameras off and microphones on mute, the speaker is left talking into a lonely space, without the benefit of the buzz of the occasion. Much better to have human faces on screen, even if only to see them respond occasionally with a nod of the head or a laugh at your attempts at humour. Instead of a long presentation I now ask to be interviewed, maybe after a brief introduction, with questions from the audience afterwards. This keeps us all alive.

Secondly, the time of meetings. Many webinars or speaking engagements are now timetabled for the evening—perhaps because organisers believe that it maximises the chances of an audience. In the real world an evening event would be a big occasion, often preceded by networking and refreshments or followed by dinner. Not so in the virtual world. There's no mingling before or after, no catching up with old friends or making new ones. Dinner still has to be made, the dishwasher emptied; emails and messages answered, having built up during the day. I now try to avoid evening and weekend events—for once, modelling what I preach and addressing my own wellbeing needs.

Thirdly, interaction with the speaker. The person speaking is your guest and should be treated as such. It's demoralising to end a talk, which one may have spent months preparing, and have no immediate feedback. In real life, delegates don't just applaud to show their appreciation but often come to the front, or they talk during the breaks and continue the themes of the lecture. In a video conference, as the talk ends the speaker can be left stranded in cyberspace. Better to contact the speaker, give feedback, and provide space and time for a debrief.

While I've been rather critical of the new online space for delivering lectures, I have to remember that it wasn't all rosy in the real world: waiting for the last train home, late at night, with peanuts and warm tea as the only refreshments after a long day. Nevertheless, although we'll never return to "business as usual," we have to learn from the current normality and protect the best of the past while developing new ways of working for the future.

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Clare Gerada is chair of Doctors in Distress and medical director of NHS Practitioner Health. Her new book, *Beneath the White Coat: Doctors, their Minds and Mental Health*, is published by Routledge and can be purchased at <https://www.routledge.com/Beneath-the-White-Coat-Doctors-Their-Minds-and-Mental-Health/Gerada/p/book/9781138499737>. All royalties will be donated to *Doctors in Distress*.