

WHY ATTEND VET CONFERENCES?

THE veterinary world hosts an ever-expanding range of conferences; some are organised by overarching veterinary organisations, such as the BVA and BSAVA, while others are by more topic-focused bodies, such as the British Veterinary Dermatology Study Group.

Additions to the congress catalogue include location-focused offerings (for example, London Vet Show) or those organised by specific groups (for example, the Vets Now Emergency and Critical Care Congress). To complement the UK options, there are also many international choices, such as the Federation of European Companion Animal



Figure 1. Statue of Johann Sebastian Bach in Leipzig.

DAN O'NEILL

MVB, BSc(Hons), GPCert(SAP), GPCert(FelP), GPCert(Derm) GPCert(B&PS), MSc(VetEpi), MRCVS

considers why you should attend congresses and uses his visit to Leipzig as a case study

Veterinary Associations Euro-congress or the North American Veterinary Conference.

Despite the array of conferences, it is perhaps pertinent to ask a more basic question: why attend a congress at all? A realistic assessment of the validity of our reasons may help improve the choice of congresses we attend and maximise any benefits.

This vexing question was posed to me on the final day of the annual Society of Veterinary Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine (SVEPM) congress by a newly made friend from the University of Liverpool. Much time and organisation goes into compiling the educational and social aspects of a conference, so an appraisal of the reasons for delegate attendance becomes truly important. Equally, the attendees give their time and money to attend, so some consideration and quantification of the benefits received is warranted.

In an attempt to evaluate

reasons for congress attendance, this article will use the 2011 SVEPM conference at Leipzig as a case study to quantify the value of attending such an event on the many levels that may be deemed important.

A range of criteria is evaluated on a scale of one to five (poor to excellent), both prior to attendance and following the conference. The prior values permit comparison between substitute offerings while the post values help decisions on whether expectations have been met.

Table 1 lists the variables included in this case study. Alternative variables can be included specific to individual interests and situations, allowing rapid evaluation and decision making.

Topic

It is to be hoped the primary motivation for attending any congress is an intrinsic interest in the subject area. This was my first

visit to SVEPM. After 20 years in general practice and completing a masters in epidemiology at the RVC, I have embarked on an epidemiology PhD (also at the RVC), so the overall subject area of SVEPM was very much of current interest.

However, it is still important to investigate the specific lectures and speakers on offer. Are these relevant and hot topics? Are the speakers leaders in their field?

Most topics at SVEPM were based on large animal studies. As my specific area of interest is cat and dog disease epidemiology using small animal practice clinical databases, the SVEPM lecture schedule initially seemed of low direct relevance. However, the general theories and methodology presented could easily be transferred across species and so there was a high value.

The speakers were mostly PhD students or post-doctorals but were very knowledgeable on their specific topics. Instead of wide-ranging subject reviews, they presented their latest research and cutting-edge techniques. BSAVA conference, by comparison, employs the big hitters in the various fields for its pre-eminent lecture streams.

Location

Location is another big factor in conference choice. Some remain fixed at specific locations – facilitating familiarity with travel routes, accommodation and venue facilities. Others, such as SVEPM, move annually to distribute the hosting honour and organisational load between universities or countries. In 2010, SVEPM was held in Nantes and in 2012 it will be in Glasgow.

For some people, travelling abroad is a major deterrent – for



Figure 2 (above). St Nicholas' Church, Leipzig where the peaceful revolution of 1989 began. Figure 3 (inset). The nautically themed Casablanca hostel.

me, this was one of the attractions. I had no idea where Leipzig was and what it would be like, but the unknown is much more exciting than predictability.

My preconceptions were of a grey utilitarian city with standardised functional buildings, but I discovered Leipzig is a beautiful city with a history of culture. Sightseeing was a delight and I took the opportunity to visit St Thomas' Church, where the composer Johann Sebastian Bach was buried in 1750 (Figure 1), as well as attending a music recital there.

Leipzig also boasts St Nicholas' Church where the peaceful revolution of 1989 began that ultimately led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany (Figure 2). Illuminated brickbats have been inset into the cobbles around the church, which progressively illuminate at night to

commemorate the burgeoning freedom movement.

The choice, availability and cost of accommodation become important factors if daily travel from home is not practical. Many conferences are near airports and hotels, but the cost can vary dramatically – both within one city as well as between two.

Leipzig is amazingly good value as a destination: a good quality hotel in Leipzig costs €59 per night. In an effort to save cost in these straitened times I flew by Ryanair to nearby Altenburg and then chose a hostel called the Casablanca in Leipzig (Figure 3). At €35 per night I expected the worst, but was pleasantly surprised. It was easy to get to, clean and breakfast was good. Moreover, it had the novelty of being styled like a submarine, with undersea scenes on the walls inside and out. Interestingly, as a piece of trivia, our return flight was the last Ryanair flight out of Altenburg, as the airport closed that day.

Conference facilities should also be checked out in advance. Readily available coffee and lunch during breaks, as well as comfortable seating in lectures, is important. SVEPM scored highly in this respect. The conference also had a large poster presentation, conveniently situated near the refreshments to encourage reading and discussion, and lecture theatres were large with multiple screens.

Social aspect

Congress is as much a social gathering as an educational one and a range of evening entertainment options are often provided – this can turn a good meeting into a great one.

The SVEPM 2011 organisers are to be congratulated on their excellent evening activities. On the first evening our group dined in the cellar vaults of Auerbachs Hof, where Goethe, the famous

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TABLE 1. Reasons to attend conference comparator table

Reasons for congress attendance	1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)	
	Prior value	Post value
Specific interest in the topic area	5	5
Titles of lectures	2	4
Quality of speakers	2	4
Course location	3	4
Conference facilities	3	3
Chance to meet old friends and to make new ones	3	4
Value for money	2	4
Further career opportunities	2	2
Accommodation/travel	3	4
Social events organised	2	4
Commercial exhibition	0	0
Holiday	2	2
Fun	2	4
Overall index result	31	44



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German writer, got the inspiration for his drama *Faust*. The entrance is guarded by statues of Mephisto and Faust and the walls are adorned with oil paintings of famous Faust scenes.

Entertainment on the second night was even better. Delegates rode in 1950s and 1960s retro-style buses to a converted warehouse housing a superb exhibition of classic cars. This was followed by a wonderful meal and ceilidh-type dancing, accompanied by an eclectic fusion band. Observing the illuminati of the epidemiology world struggling along with the rest of us mere mortals to master complicated steps was reassuring. Giftedness in one discipline does not always translate into universal aptitudes. The opportunity to relax and catch up with old friends while also making new ones should rank as one of the major pluses from such meetings. The small numbers at SVEPM made getting to know new people easier.

Value for money

Conference attendance can come with quite a financial burden. Practices often allow a set amount to attend, so comparing events is worthwhile to get the most bang for your buck. A little creativity and effort can also reduce the overall costs. SVEPM offered an early bird discount of €50. The €420 fee (€270 for students) at SVEPM was very good value as it included all coffee and lunches, evening entertainment and a free tram pass during congress. Some congresses, such as BSAVA, also offer a free day or whole congress passes for poster or clinical research abstract presentations.

These events can be a useful aid to advancing your career. The knowledge gained may help towards further qualifications. Contacts made or renewed may lead to new job opportunities and an oral or poster presentation will raise your personal profile within your specialist area. SVEPM went a stage further in its job centre role by providing a notice board where positions were actively advertised.

It is a salutary point worth remembering that a 2am Elvis impersonation may, in essence, become part of a protracted informal interview for positions that have not yet been imagined. On the other hand, perhaps life is too short for such qualms and future employers may have a penchant for Elvis after all. So worry not and sing on.

Many congresses are heavily subsidised by commercial exhibitors. These also add greatly to the overall benefits by showcasing their latest developments and commercial offers. For those in practice, congress offers an opportunity to speak to many company representatives within a short period of time and compare respective commercial propositions. Deals can be done and relationships strengthened.

However, SVEPM had no commercial exhibition, so provided no benefit in this regard.

Pleasurable experience

For many, a trip to congress offers an opportunity to combine function with pleasure. Partners and children may accompany the delegate or travel a few days later to enjoy some spare days added to the itinerary. This reduces overall travel costs for a family holiday as well as being tax-

efficient. My extra time at Leipzig added greatly to the experience, allowing time to see the city as well as catch up with friends.

Despite these much-vaunted educational and career benefits, it must not be forgotten that life is a finite event. Time once spent cannot be recovered and thus should be treasured and spent wisely. Conference attendance should be fun, something anticipated with pleasure and remembered with warmth.

The "all work and no play" truism applies as much here as in any other facet of life. The fun factor incorporates many of the values already described. For my part, SVEPM was a hugely enjoyable event.

So, how did SVEPM fare in the scorings? From **Table 1** the prior index value of 31 was distinctly mediocre. However, the post-index value of 44 confirms what a great event this was and that it exceeded my expectations. It

DAN O'NEILL qualified from University College Dublin School of Veterinary Medicine in 1987 before gaining a BSc(Hons) in pharmacology in 1991. He was awarded a MSc(VetEpi) in 2010 from the RVC and has now embarked on an epidemiology PhD into inherited and acquired disorders of cats and dogs, sponsored by the RSPCA also at the RVC. Dan is interested in using practice electronic patient records to evaluate the prevalence of common feline and canine conditions.



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your own figures, select your congress and wrap yourself in your own chosen tapestry. It's warmer inside. ■

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