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 Vet Show) or those organised by more topic-focused bodies, such as the Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations EuroCongress 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.

Consider why you should attend congresses and uses his visit to SVEPM as a case study.

VETERINARY TECHNICIANS (VT41.39)

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Visiting Leipzig

Though the array of congresses is as wide as the variety of the topics they cover, they are not all created equal. It is perhaps pertinent to ask: why attend a conference at all? A realistic assessment of the validity of our reasons may help improve the choice of congresses we attend and maximise any benefits.

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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 rewarding. 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 plusses 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 litany of commercial offers. For those in practice, congress offers an opportunity to speak to many 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-sought educational and career benefits, it must not be forgotten that life is a finite event. Time once spent cannot be recouped 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, did SVEPM fare in the end? 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 was the rich tapestry of client and pets that made two decades of clinical practice so great, and life’s tapestry continues to delight. Do your own figures, select your congress and wrap yourself in your own chosen tapestry. It’s warmer inside.

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 at 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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