

PERSPECTIVE

Will we return to the days of chance meetings at scientific conferences?

Many years ago, I waited behind a tall man at the coat check at a scientific congress. He handed in his coat, I left my jacket and then I suddenly I noticed his name tag. James M Tanner. This was before the word starstruck was invented, but I remember thinking "Of course, that is somebody's name!". But not just any name. As a paediatrician, I use the Tanner stages test named after him to grade a child's pubertal development. I had never really thought about it, but suddenly the person who invented the pubertal staging was standing in front of me, greeting me politely.

In spring 2020, another scientific conference held by a drug company in Boston turned into one of the first super-spreader events for COVID-19 in the USA. As I write this, a year after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, we have got used to attending Web-based conferences. No more airline travel, with a fragile poster in a clumsy paper roll. No more feeling lost on the first day at an elaborate congress centre in a city that seems exciting, but we have no time to explore. No more sudden realisations that the picture being displayed in a dark lecture hall looks like my patient! No chance of seeing the great researchers present on stage, sometimes with the aura of rock stars. And no legendary players standing right next to us at the coat check.

These days, we log into Web congresses and we do not need to choose between Hall A1 or Room E27. We can watch them all, one presentation after the other, and handle e-mails on the side if it gets boring. I can even decide to watch the recorded presentations tonight after work and do something more important now.

It is a climate-smart, family-friendly, effective use of time. But it is also exceedingly dull.

However, it does raise a serious point and that is how will all these changes, which have been forced on us by a global pandemic, affect future scientific interactions? Last year's Nobel Laureates in chemistry, Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna, who I always think of as do u DNA, first met in a corridor at a conference in Puerto Rico. That may be one of those Sliding Doors moments, when a decision can take our life in a completely different direction. If you haven't seen the film, it focuses on two scenarios, based on what

would have happened if a character played by Gwyneth Paltrow had caught a train or not. Just think, if Charpentier and Doudna had not met in that corridor? One of the sharpest tools in genetics, the CRISPR-Cas9 genetic scissors, may not have been invented.

Luck deserves respect. Or as the French scientist Louis Pasteur once said, chance favours the prepared mind. Impulses, ideas and joy are all based on humans interacting with each other. The unfriendly, lone researcher is a myth. Research is meeting, exchanging and sharing. Hard work, but sheer luck sometimes.

Some anticipate that life after COVID-19 will resemble the 1920s, which was a time of glitter and glamour and a bright contrast to World War One and the Spanish flu. Others remind us that this is our chance to step up and make changes, cut down on travelling to limit fossil fuel emissions and use new virtual communication techniques instead. Congress halls will be refurbished into apartments. The phrase city weekend will become less common, as we no longer have the urge to come back and look at that really nice city that we glimpsed on our way to a busy conference hall. Fashion designers will focus on upper-body garments that look great during Zoom meetings. Restaurants will keep cooking takeaway meals. When the airline companies wake up from the shock of extended lockdowns, tickets will be unaffordable and we will not dare book them anyway. Will science survive by apps that continue the connections forged by those that used to bump into each other at meetings before COVID-19 dominated our lives? Will we wonder what the advantages were of meeting in real life, with our minds set on exploring, learning and curiosity, as we find that important email message hiding in one of our many inboxes during a normal busy day at home?

In fact, will we even remember what we miss from the life we used to live as part of the international community of clinicians and scientists? I must admit that I am really longing to take off for a splendid conference as I connect on Zoom. I don't know whether we will ever get back to those days or whether we will need to adapt to a new normal. But it would be sad if random events, like my coat check moment with James M Tanner, or the meeting of two future Nobel Laureates in a conference corridor, were a thing of the past.

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