



Editorial *Comprehensive Ophthalmology*

Ophthalmic conferences – Are they too many?

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Conferences are an integral part of any medical specialty, more so for a surgical skill-based science such as ophthalmology. There has been a steady and steep rise in the number of ophthalmic conferences held in India and abroad. The exact number of such congresses is unknown, but the meetings' calendar on the All India Ophthalmological Society (AIOS) website suggests the number to be around 100 (in India). It includes the prestigious Annual Conference of AIOS (AIOC), the newly added mid-term conference of AIOS, State ophthalmic society's annual conference (26 affiliated State societies), their mid-term meets, subspecialty conferences (19 affiliated zonal/city/super specialty societies) of Glaucoma Society of India, Vitreo Retina Society of India (VRSI), Cornea Society of India, Oculoplasty Association of India (OPAI) (mid-term and annual), Intraocular Implant and Refractive Society, India (summer and winter), Indian Society of Cornea and Keratorefractive Surgeons, International Society of Manual Small Incision Cataract Surgeons, Strabismus and Pediatric Ophthalmological Society of India, Indian Pediatric Glaucoma Society, and Ocular oncology conference to name a few. Zonal society conferences (Eastern India Zonal Ophthalmological Congress, Bombay Ophthalmologists Association, etc.) add up to the list. The omnipresent Community Ophthalmology Conference (Association of Community Ophthalmologists of India [ACOIN] with its 16 State chapters) cannot be overlooked. The trending gender and age-biased societies' conferences, namely, the Women Ophthalmologists Society with 18 State chapters and the Young Ophthalmologists Society of India (YOSI), are making the list longer. Personal institutional conferences such as Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus Network, and Lenticule Congress are incremental to the list.

The average number of days in these conferences is usually two, though some bigger society meetings extend up to 3 or 4 days (e.g., AIOC, VRSI, and OPAI). A few of these meetings are preceded by a pre-conference workshop. If we consider the number of days spent in conferences around the year (100×2) and the travel time involved in attending those meetings ($100 \times 2 \times 2 = 400$), it will engage the clinician's entire calendar year. Alarming, isn't it? Casual stalking of a renowned Indian ophthalmologist's Facebook page showed an astounding 20 conference visits in 10 months. This brings us to the relevant question of 'Do we need so many conferences?'

Conferences are a foremost element of the professional, academic, and social life of health-care service providers. In 2011, a source listed 2012 medical conferences, including 259 online webinars held globally. John Ioannidis noted that a presumption of over one lakh medical conferences per annum universally may not be an exaggeration. The summative expenditure incurred to organize those global congresses is unfathomable.^[1] In Australia, pharmaceutical companies spent a whopping 30 million dollars (Indian rupees >200 crore) in organizing 18,000 medical meets in just 6 months. All these conferences are aided by industry, both pharmaceuticals and surgical manufacturers. Hence, the inconspicuous influence of pharmaceutical companies

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in such medical meets cannot be ruled out.^[2] The total fund generated for the biggest ophthalmic conference in India was approximately Rs 25 crores (2022).^[3] In the latest edition of the annual conference of our parent organization, there were 46 prime sponsors besides 143 other trade exhibitors. The total carpet area dedicated to exhibitors was a staggering 97,278 square feet.^[4] While the organizers must have burnt many midnight candles to make this happen, it is evident that the industry support will expect their due return on investment. This obviates the ‘conflict of interest’ while writing a placebo lubricating drop or inserting a premium intraocular lens.

Much has been spoken about the benefits of conferences, such as surgical skill enhancement, networking with peers and professional idols, keeping us updated, and enabling novice surgeons to explore career scope.^[5] However, in this era of ‘virtual boom,’ any technology, new surgical skill, or recent advances is just a click away, which can be accessed in the comfort of our clinic, car, or home. There is a plethora of webinars, YouTube videos, or podcasts available for free, which may suffice to satiate our academic hunger, although face-to-face physical meets do have an edge over the virtual ones. Arguably, the greatest advantage of a conference is to project yourself, making yourself known to the fraternity by presenting a paper, poster, video, or as a faculty. While the experts or the frequent speakers might have 20–25 commitments in a 4-day conference (AIOC), there will be multitudes of delegates who never get a podium presence. Hence, the goal of any clinician planning to attend whichever conference should essentially be to present first and then attend relevant sessions. For the *youngistan*, YOSI is going ways to mentor them and give them a stage appearance. Some of the tips to make the most of conference visits are cited below:

1. Decide well ahead which conferences to attend around the year. Keep track of when the abstract submission portal opens and closes. Prepare your abstract according to the word limit and structured protocol. Always click on the ‘Paper or poster’ option. This increases the chance of acceptance.
2. If you do not have any free paper/poster material available, try to submit faculty topics. There are many conferences that invite speakers for talks of their choice (midterm AIOC, Delhi Ophthalmological Society conference, ACOIN meet, etc.) That certainly has to be done within the stipulated time.
3. If you are reluctant to do either of the above and only want to be a delegate, get the program book and plan in advance which talks to attend. Make a timeline of the

topics you intend to learn or clarify for each conference day. If you do have a genuine doubt, do not shy away from asking questions during the time allotted for the panel discussion.

4. Do not just attend a conference because you loved the venue and sightseeing is your primary agenda. You can always keep an extra day dedicated to touring. If academics are not on your mind but the conference is, do indulge in social networking. This will enable you to upgrade your performance or build consensus on factious issues.
5. Trade halls are a great place to check on new devices, microscopes, sterilizers, video recording tools, or yet unheard-of investigative equipment. Spend quality time, preferably with any senior colleague who can guide you through the buying or ordering of any gadget.
6. If sharpening surgical skills is on your mind, a conference is not the place to be. Rather, go to YouTube and look for videos on the particular surgery that needs improvement. From lamellar corneal surgeries to membrane peeling, trabeculotomy to inserting that B-hex ring, you have it all.

As for the debate on the number of conferences per annum, there have to be regulatory authorities limiting the meets. Industry participation should be monitored so as not to have the companies stretched for funds perennially. The meetings need to be more focused and reflective rather than suggestive of opulence and extravagance. So far as the delegates are concerned, the onus is on them to make the conference attendance a fruitful and learning experience.

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