

What I look for at a conference (and why you should go to BACO 2023)

BY CLAIRE HOPKINS

Professor Claire Hopkins has attended more than her fair share of international meetings, and she shares her top tips.

COVID has changed the face of medical education forever – who would have thought only a few years ago that we would connect virtually with hundreds of colleagues worldwide, yelling ‘you’re on mute’ at a screen full of faces sitting in front of a beachside backdrop or a hastily tidied office with pets and offspring zoom-bombing presentations. I’m somewhat disappointed no-one has appeared as a cat or been caught out in their underwear at any of the meetings I attended, but I for one am delighted that travel has resumed and we can switch off the screen, pack our suitcases and meet face to face again.

Yes, there are certain advantages to attending from the comfort of home, provided the time zone is not too punishing (I’ve given a few lectures at 2am, and that’s not fun): these include lessened environmental impact, reduced absence from work and family and, usually, lower costs. There is a wealth of webinars available free of charge. So why attend BACO in person? I’ll reflect on what I look for at conferences in the hope that it will remind you all of what we’ve been missing, and inspire you to make the journey to Birmingham next year.

Something that changes my practice

At each conference, I aim to make sure I find at least one thing that will change my practice when I get home – we work in a rapidly evolving specialty and there are so many new technologies and advances in medical therapies, that it’s impossible to

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Figure 1. Joseph Manjaly and his band, The Arrhythmics, will be playing at the BACO 2023 party.

keep up with the evidence base. Meetings are the perfect opportunity to catch up. One of my favourite short paper presentations enhanced my practice in such a simple way – polypoid oedema of the middle turbinate is an excellent marker of inhalant allergy, with 95% specificity [1]. It’s the crystal ball of rhinology – I look in the nose and can declare ‘you have allergies’, almost without needing the confirmatory skin prick test. Genius. I’d probably never had read the paper but sitting in the lecture room, it really grabbed my attention.

But, as with any conference, there are almost too many parallel sessions and a great fear of missing out, so we’ve created an ‘Advances in...’ series for each subspecialty so you can head straight there to get the latest in your field, and we’ll be incorporating the best of the short papers into the main sessions so that they are not missed. Even better, all sessions will be recorded so that you can even catch up on any that you didn’t get to or simply want to watch again.

Something that keeps me up to date

As we become increasingly subspecialised, it becomes harder to keep up to date on more general ENT and I worry that my practice will fall behind. So, every meeting,

I make a point of going along to a couple of sessions outside of my field – whether it’s when to refer for cochlear implantation or use of robotics in parathyroid surgery. Again, we hope to make this easy for everyone coming to BACO, with a ‘Key topics’ session for each subspecialty, aiming to update those working outside the subspecialty area. Perfect also for trainees at all levels and GPs with a specialist interest in ENT.

Something new to play with

The expo is always a goldmine for new gadgets and gizmos – I’ve been really fortunate to have been amongst the first in the UK to try out a number of new technologies, having first encountered them at conferences and been given the opportunity to try them out on a simulator. We’re lucky to have support from all the major surgical and pharmaceutical companies, so there will be plenty of

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Figure 2. Gadgets, guidance, gastronomy and a good old gossip - you'll find all this and more at BACO 2023.

chances to find something new and, with waiting lists ever growing, there may be something that helps deliver treatments better, faster or in a new setting.

Someone to make me think

It's often what happens after the lectures that I learn the most from – discussing a difficult case, sharing a bad outcome or success stories. It's 'virtually' impossible to interact in the same way online; the chat room function doesn't cut it. I've found future fellows and even consultant colleagues over a cup of tea at a conference. Many of my research projects have stemmed from the coffee break conversations I've had – whether it's meeting new colleagues from the UK or further afield. The network of colleagues and friends that I've built up over the years yielded huge benefits when we entered the COVID pandemic, as we quickly and freely shared information and experiences. It led to the early discovery of anosmia as an indicator of COVID and has resulted in many publications and lecture invitations. It's a great pleasure to be able to invite many back to join us as our keynote lecturers – they are all leaders in their fields and are not to be missed.

There'll be plenty of opportunities at BACO to reunite with friends and colleagues as well as making new ones and, for me, it's the highlight of returning face to face.

And someone to unwind with

There's nothing better after a long day at a meeting than to sit down and share a meal with friends, old and new. From Oscar selfies, fine dining, fish and chips to

football finals, there is usually never a quiet moment! BACO will not disappoint with the BACO party featuring our very own Joseph Manjaly with his band, The Arrhythmics – I can guarantee, based on personal experience, that they will have everyone up on the dance floor. Just look at some of the pictures from when they played at the ERS meeting in London (Figure 1).

Finally – someone to inspire me

The COVID pandemic has left many struggling with burnout and all of us are facing tremendous pressures within the NHS. Our plenary lecturers will each bring a very unique perspective to inspire us. Dr Rachel Clarke has used her huge Twitter following to keep the public updated throughout the pandemic and has not shied away from highlighting the failings in the UK response. She will share some of the pearls and perils of engaging with social media as a medical professional. Anna Soubry, a former MP and Under-Secretary for Public Health will generate discussion on how we might tackle some of the shortfall. And finally, who could be more inspiring than David Nott, the UK trauma surgeon who has travelled to some of the world's most dangerous places, training local surgeons to save lives in the midst of conflict. Having recently been in the Ukraine, he will share some of his own experiences that will likely leave us feeling that the NHS isn't so bad after all.

If you're in any doubt as to whether to attend BACO, have a look at some of our keynote speakers featured in this edition

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and then head over to the ENT UK website to view the programme. It will have been five years since the last face-to-face BACO and it's certainly going to be worth the wait. I look forward to seeing you all there.

Reference

1. Hamizan AW, Christensen JM, Ebenzeret J, et al. Middle turbinate edema as a diagnostic marker of inhalant allergy. *Int Forum Allergy Rhinol* 2017;**7**(1):37-42.

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