

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Symposia and congresses

Symposia, seminars, workshops, discussion meetings and congresses are the life-blood of a scientist's existence. Scientists are social animals and congregate frequently. Despite the enormous number of journals and the internet, the most direct way of information transfer is by personal contact. Not surprisingly, many scientists flock to symposia quite regularly. While the small meetings attended by relatively few scientists can be academically intense, the large congresses may provide mixed experiences. Plenary lectures are usually delivered by well-known speakers, generally stars in their chosen fields. These are well attended and can prove inspirational to younger scientists hearing the lectures for the first time. For more experienced congress attendees the plenaries invoke a sense of *deja vu*. This is largely because the superstars are frequently featured as lead speakers and quite often have little time to change their lectures and add dramatically new material. Indeed, growing invitations to lecture can be a sign of scientific success, inevitably leading to larger absences from the laboratory.

Symposia can also provide insights into the importance of presentations in determining perceptions about a scientist's work. Sitting through interminable sessions where unintelligible speakers run past their allotted time (while session chairpersons quietly wring their hands in despair), is a professional hazard in a scientist's life. Very often interesting results are hidden by badly prepared and poorly articulated talks. Sometimes, the lack of clarity in presentation is a consequence of muddle-headed thinking, which extends to the research itself; most often it is merely a reflection of the poor preparation of the speaker. Indeed, the importance of public presentations is being stressed so much in today's management circles, that scientists might try to learn a trick or two from marketing men. Scientific research and the results obtained by hard labour in the laboratory may also be viewed as commodities, whose importance, utility and reach, must be effectively sold. While publication of results is the ultimate mechanism for dissemination, oral presentations of the work are an important forerunner. Participating in seminars and symposia is thus, an essential feature of

scientific life and an important element in the training of new entrants to the profession.

Having conceded the importance of congregations of scientists, it is worthwhile asking a more provocative question. Do we have too many scientific meetings, national and international? There has been a proliferation in the number of scientific societies and academies over the years. Every subfield now has its own specialist society. In interdisciplinary areas the same people are members of several societies. The Academies have their own meetings, often as many as two every year. These somewhat 'elitist' gatherings, give an impression of belonging to another, more genteel age, where the typical audience was expected to have a broad understanding of diverse areas of science. The reality today is that at any instant, only a very small fraction of the audience seems to understand what is being discussed by speakers, who make few concessions in being intelligible to non-experts.

In trying to establish and foster international connections many societies also attempt to act as hosts for major international congresses. This is akin to trying to host major international sporting events. Office bearers make trips abroad and make presentations to international councils, which then choose a venue from many claimants; a process not too different from the way the sites for the Olympic games are chosen. (Fortunately, scandals like the one currently afflicting the International Olympic Association are unheard of.) In India, the only city, which seems capable of hosting such mega scientific events is Delhi, although there will be others in the not too distant future. The large congresses usually have in excess of a thousand participants and are generally held in a five star ambience. Occasionally major programmes are held in public auditoria or even outdoors. An unpleasant feature of these congresses is that attendees are required to pay exorbitant registration fees, partly necessitated by the opulence of the five star surroundings. Government grants (subsidies) to these meetings sometimes run to tens of lakhs of rupees, inevitably raising the question – Is the effort and expenditure worth the outcome? Students who will benefit the most from hearing the invited speakers

cannot usually attend in large numbers – travel and registration costs being prohibitively expensive. Do organizers benefit academically by helping to host large congresses? Probably not, since they are usually too busy with the mechanics of running the show; arrangements for housing and feeding delegates, putting together cultural programmes and tours are major responsibilities. Professional management of scientific meetings is unheard of in our surroundings. Most attendees at these congresses seem to be well-travelled, symposium-goers, many of whom appear to be there so that another by-line can be added to their curriculum vitae. In the larger meetings more people can be found outside the lecture halls than within. All this leads to an inevitable question:

Should we have so many scientific meetings? Should we invite large international congresses to India, when the councils of societies involved insist on unaffordable registration fees? The most influential international unions are dominated by the First World; interests of the less well-endowed countries are hardly a matter of pressing concern. Should government tighten the purse strings in providing subsidies for these international jamborees? At a time when funding for research and support for science seems less than optimal, academies and societies would do well to practice a little austerity in the conduct of meetings.

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