

The oblique view



We continue our series in which consultant interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab... and beyond. In this column, medical conference paraphernalia come under scrutiny.

The conference bag

I am not referring here to the regular political get-togethers that punctuate the autumn or spring seasons in Brighton or Harrogate; happily, this is not about Anne Widcombe or Claire Short.

I found myself clearing out a garage recently, and it was while knee-deep in back copies of *Yachting Monthly*, expired passports (you would not believe the photographs) and broken lamps, that I came across a hoard of them. Covering in a dark corner together, as if for protection, there they all were. Spiders' webs, damp-rot and mildew had tarnished them, understandably, but slapping them against a brick wall (avoiding the resulting cloud of dust) soon restored their original significance: Cardiotim, Monte Carlo, 1985; Acute PTCA, Geneva, 1986; Fifth World Congress on Primary Care, Manila, 1972 (a classic, and one of my father's, presumably).

A major conference or meeting nowadays is not complete without attendees collecting a recognisable trophy of their experience in the form of a case, haversack or recyclable string bag proclaiming the nature, venue and timing of the par-

ticular event. What are the origins of this tradition? Is there still a purpose for such large-scale provision of these accessories? Could there be a rainforest, rubber plantation or even a small, brown-eyed, furry animal somewhere that is either being denuded or hunted to extinction in an attempt to feed the insatiable desire for these needless items?

Conference goodies

I can only presume that they were originally supplied to answer a particular need. The pharmaceutical and the device industries support international conferences with astonishingly sophisticated exhibitions and phenomenally well-stocked stands (as well as delegates' registration accommodation and travel expenses). The result is an increasingly bizarre selection of giveaway items such as pens, clocks, reading lamps, mints, lollipops, umbrellas, hats, paperweights, not to mention, squeezey, soft, rubbery stress-relieving balls (they don't work, by the way). Somehow these valued objects have to be transported around the congress centre and then back home to

your loved ones, to be presented as a hard thought-about coming home present, though they are always a tad larger than your jacket pocket.

Then there is the 'course material': the final programme, abstract book, exhibitors' catalogue, a collection of reprints from various journals that are supposed to be pertinent to the meeting, invitations to numerous evening satellite meetings at which refreshments and canapés (but not din dins) are available and a map of the city, just in case you did not know where the congress was this year. There are the 'factoids': small – but substantial – tomes, summarising succinctly every trial conducted that is in any way relevant to the conference theme; the pen – conveniently, with a torch combined – so that you, and everyone else, can make frantic notes in the darkness of the main auditorium and thereby give the speaker the sense that his session has been invaded by a swarm of fireflies; the mouse pad adorned with the conference logo and website; cath lab scrub suits, jogging vests, track suit tops and 'sweat

pants' (I think that's what they're called).

Crucially, there is also the personal, embossed invitation to the Gala Night. This is usually arranged for the penultimate night of the congress, so clashing with your recently – and hastily – arranged flight home. It may be at the local museum, opera house or bull ring and features abundant food and drink, street theatre, magic shows, fireworks and some demonstration of the national culture such as caber-tossing, Morris or clog dancing or bell ringing.

.... and events

I remember one such event in Geneva featuring a re-enactment of William Tell – including son and apple – together with an impersonator who, for every subject, pushed his dinner jacket back over his shoulders, squinted, blew out his cheeks and looked like Popeye. This seemed to work for Popeye but for no-one else – at least no-one that the UK contingent could recognise.

The most useful inclusions I remember were as part of a course in Paris, and comprised a collection of Metro tickets, while the bag

adorned with *2nd Annual Conference on Cytochrome P450 and its Modulation in Systemic Disease, Helsinki* did not immediately make me feel that this was a meeting I just had to be at. The fact that the bags are identical adds to the uniformity and *esprit de corps* that the conference hopes to generate in its attendees, but it adds also a degree of confusion in the queue for security X-ray scanning at the airport on the way home.

A PCI course in Toulouse a decade or so ago provided a T-shirt on the back of which were printed (in fairly small font) the names of all the delegates (I eventually found mine – spelled incorrectly as usual). They also produced a hard-backed 'course curriculum' that must have been at least four inches thick. Luckily, they also provided a fairly stalwart rucksack for the purpose of lugging all this stuff home (which I still use).

The modern era has seen computer bags replace the items that look more

like attaché cases. I – and my kids – have certainly found them useful but whether I need to get a new one at each conference is debatable. They seem to have far more pockets than I need: I recognise the one for a mobile phone (presumably) but I struggle to work out what I am supposed to slip into the others. Course organisers realise that most of us bring our laptops to conferences, and the sad thing is that they are probably right. Huge and unwieldy volumes of course materials have been replaced with a slim CD on which one can find the programme, abstracts, presentations and – if you're really lucky – the Popeye impersonator.

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