

In bed with Adnan Tufail

I used to like conferences. In fact, I loved them. When Euretina was in Paris in 2019 I met up with friends and colleagues, went out to bars and restaurants and took some time to see the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower. Obviously it was nice to catch up with actual retina developments too but that atmosphere of meeting up with so many people discussing the same thing while eating cheese and drinking wine has a specific appeal that the new online conferences just don't have.

College Congress introduced me to Liverpool and Birmingham. The four days in May when almost the entire trainee contingent decamped to one of these two cities and spent glorious days and evenings discussing work, boasting about personal achievements and commiserating about various setbacks we'd had were some of the best and most valuable periods in my training. There is something wonderful and magical about meeting the big names of ophthalmology face to face and feeling part of a community of people. An ostensibly equal community of good people all striving for the same thing and fighting the good fight. I fondly remember having curries with people who under any other circumstance would not find themselves somehow part of the Welsh contingent, discussing new developments in ophthalmology and gossiping about the human interactions at the heart of the greatest of our ophthalmic institutions. One of my fondest memories is when Bernie Chang, now president, bought a round for a random bunch of Welsh ophthalmologists in a hotel venue right next to Congress simply because we were there and he's a nice guy.

I attended the *Eye News* Symposium (part of Eyecare) in Scotland once. The actual giving of the lecture was of perhaps peripheral importance to the act of attending the event. I saw things from the optometric perspective as there was a large focus on optometry, got to have dinner with an editor from the magazine and had a discussion with a past president of the college about the pros and cons of mixed sex bathroom facilities. Through conferences like this, we all find out that we are human beings, with foibles and flaws, and that brings us all closer together as a community. I am sure the vast majority of those reading this now can think of all

kinds of happy shenanigans that took place at conferences and congresses and are perhaps worried at what I am going to say next. But there is no cause for concern, as it is the contrast with online virtual conferences that concerns me here.

One of the very many changes to our basic way of life brought on in the name of controlling coronavirus is the change to virtual online conference platforms. People are quick to point out that removing the travel requirement makes it easier to attend, reduces cost, increases flexibility and is more efficient at disseminating important information. All this is indeed true. There are some satisfying benefits unique to virtual conferences that bring me more joy than perhaps is reasonable. One of the most frustrating events at live, 'proper' conferences is trying to get up early enough to attend the breakfast sessions in good time. At Euretina last year; COVID year, there was a wonderful lecture by Adnan Tufail about central serous chorioretinopathy (CSR) that I wanted to attend. Unfortunately, this was at an unearthly time on a weekend day, partly because of the time difference and partly as a result of it being the first session of the day. Under normal circumstances there would have been huge drawbacks to attending such an event, but as it was virtual I was able to fire up the laptop in bed three minutes before the lecture, roll to one side and there I was, good to go. The audience was not filmed as questions were typed in so there really was no need to change out of pyjamas. For some reason I took some delight that world experts were discussing CSR live, in my very own bed.

Whilst this was really great, I have to admit, as the day wore on, I became more depressed at how isolating it was. I was still in my pyjamas at 11 and the conference was progressing with or without an active audience. My own logging in seemed irrelevant to the event itself. In real life conferences you have friends and colleagues asking questions and the contribution and response is a welcome social interaction that cements relationships and lets people know that you attended and respected a peer's work and opinion. You could write questions in the box, sure; but it wasn't the same. In fact, the box was even more irrelevant than you'd think as so many wrote questions and so few were acknowledged or answered

that after a few lectures I stopped typing them in at all. I probably learnt more than I had at previous conferences but the heart and soul was missing. There was no chatting with the drug rep about upcoming developments, no catching up with colleagues about a joint project that could be set up to look into something learnt at one of the lectures. No Bernie Chang to buy you a beer. No Tunnocks Teacake at the *Eye News* stand. No minute amounts of coffee in a small cardboard cup from mobile drug stand coffee bars served by disinterested staff on minimum wage. And no cutting down of acres of Brazilian rainforest to produce glossy leaflets for umpteen competing drugs that you accept from the rep out of politeness and a wish to please and which you then deposit in a bin just around the corner, filled to the brim with similar leaflets and empty tiny coffee cups.

Instead, there is tea from my own teapot with teabags from my own cupboard served by myself in my own mug. Chats are either typed into the chat box or are with my family here in the house, though interest in CSR projects is not as great or relevant here in truth. And if I want a Tunnocks Teacake I have to go to the small Co-op at the end of the street to get them myself, though their supply of this particular item is very intermittent. There are pros and cons to virtual versus live conferences and though I did enjoy seeing Adnan Tufail lecturing me live in my own bed, I really do hope we can get back to some sort of normality soon.

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