

Attending ophthalmology conferences as a foundation trainee: an eye-opener?

BY JANVI KARIA AND VIVEK BANSAL



The benefits of attending specialty conferences for clinicians are numerous. For example, staying up to date with the latest advancements in the field and integrating these into clinical practice. However, foundation doctors are yet to enter a training pathway and usually have not acquired specialty-specific knowledge. This is more evident in surgical specialties such as ophthalmology, whereby students have little exposure during medical school and foundation years (except for those fortunate to have an ophthalmic foundation rotation!).

The current ophthalmologist specialty training (OST) application portfolio offers up to three points for attending international / national / regional conferences or meetings as part of the 'commitment to specialty' section. As such, conferences are becoming increasingly populated with foundation trainees on the prowl for points. But is attending ophthalmology conferences as a foundation doctor always a good thing?

One of the biggest drawbacks of attending is the cost.

Even with discounts for junior trainees, conferences, especially those that are international, can have significant registration fees, which do not factor in the additional cost of travel to the location. Foundation trainees in the UK currently do not receive grants or funds to attend such conferences, which can place financial pressure on them.

Conferences are usually aimed at clinicians and allied healthcare professionals who are already in the specialty.

This means that the content is based on a presumed basic understanding of the specialty, and at a higher level to which the foundation doctor has been exposed to.

Practically, this can make it difficult for foundation trainees to understand the content and research being shared – many a time have

foundation doctors been noticed scrolling through Instagram while in a presentation of niche ophthalmic research! For some, this can be overwhelming, and may be off-putting from pursuing the specialty as they feel it is challenging and high-level.

This raises the question of whether attending conferences and meetings have become another 'tick-box' exercise for the application portfolio, and if so, does this dilute from the true essence of conferences?

Is it fair on the speaker to have audience members who may not have the presumed background level of knowledge and therefore unable to follow along with the presentation? One suggestion to overcome this point-prowling exercise of attending conferences is by broadening the scope of such conferences, such as by having separate seminars within the conference specifically for foundation doctors. These can be tailored to provide an insight to the specialty (e.g. 'a day in the life of an ophthalmologist' and 'what is ophthalmology?'). This increases the take-home value for foundation trainees, allowing them to obtain more from conferences than just the application points. This may encourage them to attend more conferences for the educational benefit, increasing familiarity with the field and increasing exposure to the content. However, this would require discussion with the respective organisers of the conference to create a programme more inclusive for non-ophthalmic trainees.

Often, conferences encourage volunteers to lead sessions. A foundation doctor may wish to co-lead a session with a consultant, which they can then gear more towards non-trainees, further increasing the value of attendance to such events.

Additionally, it should be considered if foundation doctors could make better use of this time by attending conferences and meetings aimed specifically at foundation trainees, for example, with direct

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relevance to their clinical practice. Alternatively, foundation doctors could attend conferences for other specialties, too, in order to broaden their horizons and explore other career options.

What are the benefits?

On the other hand, ophthalmology conferences provide an environment conducive to networking; from meeting like-minded juniors navigating the application process to experienced consultants with pearls of wisdom to share. Presentations and talks provide further insight into the career and can help to solidify the decision to pursue ophthalmology.

Foundation doctors and students can find inspiration from projects and posters displayed by colleagues and provide ideas for their own ventures.

Exhibiting instrument and drug companies with stands on display are often very keen to demonstrate their new technologies to younger doctors, often with simulation devices such as the 'EyeSi' (Haag-Streit) machine on display. This provides trainees a chance to use equipment they may not otherwise come across in their foundation placements, increasing familiarity with the various instrumentation and technology prior to commencing their specialty training.

Occasionally, conferences consist of teaching lectures designed for those taking the Duke Elder or FRCOphth Part 1 exams, which students and foundation doctors may find great benefit from. One of the most popular conferences is the RCOphth Annual Congress. This takes place at a different national location every year and brings together members of the ophthalmic community for four days of talks, research presentations, practical skills sessions and poster presentations. Additionally, there are college-specific sessions including latest policy initiatives and the inaugural presidential handover. If you are looking for a conference to join, this can be an exciting event to attend as a foundation trainee due to the scale of the event and the variety of talks taking place.

Keep in mind...

While this article has explored the pros and cons for trainees attending meetings and conferences, it is worth reemphasising the significance of attendance points earned towards OST applications, which begs the question: if these points were not available, how would trainee attendance be affected?

AUTHOR



Janvi Karia,

Foundation Year 2 Doctor, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, UK.



Vivek Bansal,

Consultant Ophthalmologist and Lead Clinician Medical Retina Service, Colchester Eye Centre, East Suffolk and North East Essex NHS Foundation Trust, UK.

Declaration of competing interests: None declared.