

# Lessons from ARVO 2025

BY GWYN SAMUEL WILLIAMS

Conferences abroad are wonderful indeed. You get to escape from the crushing grind of reality at the NHS coalface for a few days and learn about the cutting edge of your subspecialty. By the end of these events, I actually start getting enthused again and start dreaming impossible dreams about how to implement all the new things I've learnt; putting aside the fact that we don't have an electronic patient record (EPR), so AI will just never be a thing in my lifetime, and that it's difficult enough staffing normal injecting sessions without thinking about geographic atrophy. Half the ideas I come up with for audits we can present next year are unworkable, and the other half won't get done anyway as I will lose interest as work begins to bite again.

Mostly, though, it's about getting away from the soul-sapping negativity that erodes your will to carry on every single day you're exposed to the reality of ophthalmic life. As I checked my emails having arrived in Salt Lake City for ARVO, for example, I was dismayed to read that a patient had sent in an aggressive complaint having turned up on the wrong day to clinic. She had demanded to be seen even though the clinic was already overbooked. There were no notes and the patient letter she insisted on thrusting at anybody who'd listen to her tale of woe clearly had a date on it a few weeks in the future. When the reception staff had told her that she'd need to come back at the right time she'd complained so loudly and made such a fuss that she was squeezed in as an extra at the end anyway, and even then, asked loudly for the complaint form as she was so angry and annoyed. What's wrong with these people? What's wrong with us ophthalmologists for putting up with being downtrodden so much of the time? I hurriedly jotted some observations, not all of them kind, resolving to put these cares to one side and concentrate on the conference.

Which was great. The seminars were top notch, the posters brilliant (and paper based – not the infernal new e-posters that now dominate everywhere) and the science fascinating. I loved the city, too. Salt Lake City was brilliant and I enjoyed the museums and learning about Mormon history. The Salt Lake itself was beautiful, though it was sad to hear that it seems to be shrinking away quite quickly and at this rate will soon be gone. By far the best bit is the networking, drinking wine and beer with old friends, new friends from around the world and one or



two celebrity ophthalmologists that walk among us like gods. Being able to bounce ideas, discuss pathways and learn from real people is as useful and usable as any of the posters or lectures. If only life could always be like this!

But it can't. The end comes and ARVO is concluded. It simply isn't feasible to carry on in conference mode forever, besides the expense would soon become ruinous and even if that wasn't a factor, some kind of liver failure would be bound to happen by some point. The leaving of Utah was made more sad by the fact that our plane packed full of ophthalmologists bound for Detroit was delayed just enough to endanger the connecting flight to Heathrow. In fact, there was a peculiar group panic unfolding as friends and colleagues would compare Delta Airlines' emails and texts about rebooking options and how best to respond. A hotel was offered for an overnight stay in Detroit, should we not want to take a flight via New York, for example. There was increasing chaos and hysteria about all this on the flight to Detroit though due to my useless grasp of technology, I could not connect to the aeroplane Wi-Fi and couldn't receive any emails.

I was happy enough reading my book and leaving things be and by some sort of miracle when we arrived, the captain announced that the Heathrow flight was being held for us and if we were quick we could perhaps make it (if we ran). Hooray! It was a sight indeed: around 30 ophthalmologists of varying ages and fitness levels legging it from one gate at Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport to another at the far end, hand luggage and poster tubes clutched tight. I made it with minutes to spare, my breath burning and raw in my throat and my tee shirt sticky but my God, I made it, along with many others who had convinced themselves they'd miss the flight too. High fives and congratulations all round.

Except for one. A vocal English ophthalmologist was very frustrated that there was someone else sitting in his business class seat. The air stewardess was confused until it emerged he'd taken the option to rebook the flight to a later one, but not to worry, there was a spare seat in economy plus for him. This wasn't good enough though and everyone in that part of the cabin was treated to his loud complaining about the service not being good enough and how he'd be putting a complaint in. The stewardess had been a bit overwhelmed so a more senior one was summoned who explained that he was lucky to get a seat at all, and also lucky the flight had been held for us at all, inconveniencing the other passengers by the delay. The back and forth continued until he took his seat and for a while afterwards, I heard him regale anyone who'd listen about the grievous injustice he'd suffered. Everyone else being polite sympathised and sadly agreed as no one had enough mental energy remaining, including myself, to explain the true nature of the situation to him. It was then that I remembered my complaining patient and realised that we are no different; everyone is a potential complaining patient in the right circumstances. That's all it takes – an inability to understand circumstances, being tired and stressed and a good old-fashioned sense of entitlement and expectation to make anyone a force sapping the goodness and goodwill out of others. Perhaps in a way that's the most valuable lesson of all I learnt at ARVO.

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