

Declining attendance at conferences locally and globally: How to combat in limited resource settings?

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Dear Editor,

Nepal is hosting several national and international conferences. This trend is growing in the past few years. It is heartening to see academicians and researchers from all over Nepal are taking up the responsibility with big enthusiasm for hosting such events. This gives hope to new and potential conference venues for the future. Such events especially in the field of psychiatry help create awareness and decrease stigma among colleagues of other specialty as well.

However, if we intend to make these events and conferences successful, we need to learn from the experiences of past as well. The efforts of the organizers should always be acknowledged but the room for improvement should never be denied. It is well known that if we do not learn from our past experience, we are likely to repeat the mistakes.

In one of the psychiatry conferences held in central part of Nepal, even though the registration was done by around 150 participants, some sessions saw barely 3-4 audiences. The possible explanations could be that the parallel sessions were more for that number of participants. It was an important learning point for future organizers because they had successfully conducted multiple national Continuing Medical Education (CMEs) programs in the same region. Also, there were many international delegates who registered but did not attend the sessions possibly because it seemed like they wanted to explore around rather than attend the scientific sessions. The same situation was seen in a neurosurgery conference organized in Pokhara. Some sessions had barely any audience.

This scenario has been seen in different international conferences as well. Possibly this is the reason why such conferences use biometric identification to encourage attendees and provide credit hours only for the sessions that are actually attended. The causes and solutions need to be pondered upon for improvising the outcome in future

conferences. There is need for such discussion so as to set appropriate trend for our younger colleagues. The following points can be guiding principles for all future organizers, especially in growing trends of peripheral events.

Causes of declining attendance or presence during the sessions:

- Knowledge and skills are easily available due to free online content and furnished presentation or abstract. So people are not much interested to attend such sessions.
- Entertainment and travel activities are organized by the participants on their own and encouraged by the 'pleasing' pharmaceutical companies.
- Sometimes overlapping of important sessions during the conference has prevented attendees to attend all of them and they are bound to choose one.
- The rise of webinars and virtual conferences has made it convenient for professionals to access educational content from the comfort of their homes. The ease of attending online sessions eliminates the necessity for physical presence at conferences.
- Professionals often face heavy workloads and time constraints due to clinical responsibilities and administrative duties. This impedes their ability to dedicate extended periods to longer conference, resulting in lower session participation.
- Attendees may perceive a lack of meaningful networking opportunities during sessions. If conferences do not facilitate interactions or discussions that add value beyond online resources, professionals may choose alternative methods for networking.
- A narrow range of session topics may discourage professionals with diverse interests from attending. Conferences that diversify their content to address a

broader spectrum of issues can attract a more varied audience.

- Recent global health concerns, such as pandemics, may deter individuals from attending in-person conferences due to health and safety considerations.

How to combat the situation?

- Maintain mandatory attendance during the sessions.
- Make the session accredited to credit points offered by the medical council and these points should be allotted as per the individual's presence in the sessions.
- Provide perks and rewards for the audience especially young colleagues like residents. Points can be allotted to the attendees that can be redeemed later. The highest point getter should be provided with other sponsorship for international conferences or academic books.
- Entertainment activities should be organized by the conference organizers in liaison with the scientific committee. This should be done before or after the scientific sessions at predetermined places. Pharmaceutical companies should be deterred from arranging customized trips for individuals.
- Other medical staffs should be encouraged by personal invitation to head of departments. Also involving interns and medical students through their submissions should be encouraged.
- Install classical posters instead of e-posters so as to engage people even if the screens or the presenters are not available around. These posters should be installed throughout the conference days.
- Multiple petty submissions should not be discouraged. Instead, the excess submissions, which cannot be accepted as presentations, can be accommodated as poster presentations.
- Invitations and advertisement brochure should be sent to medical colleges and institutes from other countries as well.
- Patients and caregivers can be given forums to speak on consumers behalves.
- In resource-limited settings, travel expenses and logistical challenges can deter attendance. Embracing virtual components, such as live-streaming sessions and interactive online platforms, broadens accessibility, allowing professionals to participate without the burden of travel costs.
- Customizing conference content to address the specific needs and challenges faced by professionals in resource-limited settings.
- Utilizing tele psychiatry for presentations, enabling renowned speakers to contribute without the need for physical presence. This not only diversifies the expertise accessible at the conference but also reduces costs associated with speaker travel.
- Rotating conference locations within regions to increase accessibility for professionals in different areas. This approach minimizes travel distances for attendees, making it more practical for those in resource-limited settings to participate.
- Integrating practical, hands-on workshops and skill-building sessions that enhance the professional capabilities of attendees. This approach adds tangible value to the conference experience, making it more appealing and justifying the investment for professionals in limited resource settings.
- Establishing partnerships can lead to reduced registration fees, travel grants, and increased support for conference infrastructure, making attendance more feasible for professionals in resource-limited settings.
- Promoting conferences through digital platforms, utilizing social media, email newsletters, and targeted advertising. This approach maximizes reach, ensuring that professionals in resource-limited settings are aware of and engaged with the conference content [1]

Certainly, there are appreciable points from the past conferences in Nepal. One of them is the rapid growth in the number of medical doctors and other health care workers. In the conference that we had mentioned earlier, there was even inclusion of perspectives from faith healers, reporters and non-medical personnel as well. Similarly, self-help groups have been welcomed and World Health Organization has taken part actively recently.

Early career psychiatrists should be given separate forum to have their say so that they inculcate the culture of academics and research. They work better on the modeling principles and new leaders can be groomed through such forums [2]. The younger colleagues can be encouraged through medals, rewards and attention among fellow colleagues. In view of their shorter attention span, small (3-5 minutes) presentation sessions for competition purpose should be arranged. This kind of reinforcement works better with such age group. The use of mobile applications for program updates and incorporation of hybrid mode of conference can be costly for our setup but it cannot be denied in future.

In conclusion, the decline in conference attendance is a multifaceted challenge influenced by the evolving landscape of professional development, changing preferences, and external factors such as global health concerns. To reverse this trend, conference organizers must adapt to the needs and expectations of modern professionals. This includes embracing virtual formats, enhancing networking opportunities, diversifying session content, and addressing financial and time constraints. By fostering an environment that prioritizes innovation, engagement, and accessibility, conferences can regain their appeal and remain invaluable platforms for the exchange of knowledge and extensive collaboration.

References

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