

Poster: a Practice to be Revised!

Luís Beck-da-Silva^{1,2} and Luís Eduardo Rohde^{1,2}

Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre (HCPA)¹; Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)², Porto Alegre, RS - Brazil

“Science commits suicide when it adopts a creed.”
Thomas Huxley

“Posters are a practical and dynamic method for dissemination of scientific research findings, even the preliminary ones, for a wide audience of researchers. It is also a time to interact with researchers from other centers, to integrate groups working in similar fields and to disseminate knowledge with speed. Moreover, it is a suitable forum for students to engage in the implementation and presentation of their research.”

The presentation of scientific papers at conferences is regarded by many as a key step in the process of consolidating and building knowledge. As an alternative to the traditional oral presentation, presentation in posters is a common practice in Brazil and worldwide, based on concepts intuitively correct, but little validated.

Let us see, in practice, if each of the statements above can resist the forcefulness of small doses of reality and contemporaneity.

“Posters are a practical and dynamic method for dissemination of scientific research findings.” Posters require that researchers move to the host city of congresses, to find and go to the building where the event is to be staged and find out where their posters are to be presented. This place is often singled out from the central events of the congress and at a time that is hardly conducive to interaction. Is this practical or feasible in a world where researchers can communicate daily through electronic means in a quick and efficient manner?

“A form of networking with researchers from other centers.” Unfortunately, the poster is an activity appreciated by too few conference attendees. It is not uncommon that poster presenters only interact with their “appraiser”, a well-intentioned person who often lacks the most basic knowledge about the research topic concerned, though. The constructive interaction with a group of researchers involved and capable of aggregating relevant suggestions have been becoming

less frequent in many events. This fact becomes even more evident in conferences involving many different fields and heterogeneous knowledge.

“A form of knowledge dissemination.” Is this contact form an efficient way to integrate groups and disseminate knowledge? In fact, it requires hours and hours of standing to present our poster for a minimum number of people who often pass by the place of presentation only towards the exit door! For years, many conferences have tested the use of electronic posters as an alternative and creative way to reach a larger audience. In the current format, the traditional poster is just a too little competitive dissemination channel compared to the number of people who use e-mails, download full scientific articles or post their views on modern means of interaction (Twitter, blogs and websites of reputable scientific journals). After all, would not the final publication of a paper in a journal available electronically be the most efficient way for such dissemination?

“It is suitable for students...” Finally, perhaps the most important and sensitive point: the students. Students involved in basic scientific research activities nurture high expectations with the presenting a poster at a Conference, particularly the national ones. The preparation is time consuming and involves detailed discussion with their professors about aspects of format and scientific methodology. They worry intensely with questions that may arise from the audience. Personal and financial investment is substantial. Then, they place their poster at the designated place... And now? They stay in an empty corridor, usually in the evening, seeing exhausted attendees heading to the exit, worried about getting back to their hotel. It is for those interested students and aspiring researchers that presenting a poster at a conference may become a frustration. One may wonder whether all the effort made is, in fact, justifiable.

A relevant question concerns the intrinsic scientific quality of what is presented in scientific conferences. International surveys confirm the low rate of publication of full papers from abstracts presented at congresses.

In a meta-analysis, Von Elm et al¹ estimated the rate of publication after international biomedical conferences, evaluating abstracts from 1957 to 1999 and found a rate of only 27% within two years after the event. Estimates of its kind applied to the Brazilian reality are not available, but it is not expected that the results are higher. Explanations for this phenomenon are still incipient². It is known that trials with negative results are less likely to be published, which is known as publication bias, but the presentation of non-consolidated preliminary results from clinical research and scientific experiments is also responsible for such low rates of publication. It is evident that preliminary results may not be subsequently confirmed and incomplete surveys may simply not be completed.

Keywords

Posters as topic; congresses as topic; education, medical/methods; research/education.

Mailing address: Luís Beck-da-Silva •
Avenida Goethe, 16/504 - Rio Branco - 90430-100 - Porto Alegre, RS - Brazil
E-mail: luisbeckdasilva@gmail.com
Manuscript received October 30, 2010; revised manuscript received January 13, 2011; accepted January 30, 2011.

Point of View

Finally, only a small portion of these papers, even with a clear scientific merit, does not find space for final publication. So what's the fate of the unpublished knowledge produced and presented at conferences? A suggestion for scientific societies and librarians would be alternative ways, even if only in electronic media, to publish the huge number of abstracts presented at conferences. A sort of "Pub Med" for free-topics should perhaps be considered. This would restore the importance of unpublished free-topics (often called dark-data)³.

The mere repetition of a practice merely because one believes that the perpetuation of a routine is a successful recipe may hurt one of the basic principles governing scientific activity. Besides this, frustrated expectations of a new generation of researchers can undermine what should be the essence of scientific medical meetings: a dynamic and stimulating forum for harmonization and interaction of people interested in common subjects.

In this sense, the Brazilian Society of Cardiology should reflect the activity of placing poster in our conferences, particularly in our biggest event - the Brazilian Congress of Cardiology. We do not suggest the "suspension" of this form of presentation. Instead, our suggestion is to encourage the participation and the interaction of researchers and students at our conferences through more creative, modern and efficient

ways to disseminate knowledge other than the current model. We recommend a stricter selection of papers, consistent with the notable improvement in the quality of Brazilian research. Also, we suggest a substantial decrease in the number of abstracts approved in order to give more value to those selected. Cardiovascular research leaders could also be called for poster sessions to assess them. That the process of selecting the best papers presented be done during the Congress, based on their presentations, rather than in advance. Finally, that it happens in the prime time of the Congress, in the main room.

From our research will derive our new values.

Potential Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Sources of Funding

There were no external funding sources for this study.

Study Association

This study is not associated with any post-graduation program.

References

1. von Elm E, Costanza MC, Walder B, Tramèr MR. More insight into the fate of biomedical meeting abstracts: a systematic review. *BMC Med Res Methodol.* 2003;3:12. .
2. Rowe N, Ilic D. What impact do posters have on academic knowledge transfer? a pilot survey on author attitudes and experiences. *BMC Med Educ.* 2009;9:71.
3. Illig J. Archiving "event knowledge": bringing "dark data" to light. *J Med Libr Assoc* 2008;96(3):189-91.