

Meeting Here, Meeting There, Meeting Everywhere?

I have just returned from another terrific meeting held at a beautiful resort hotel, situated on one of the most fabulous beaches in the world, with world-class amenities and a signature golf course. The scientific program was top notch, with leaders in dermatology from across the country in attendance. The schedule was rigorous and included presentations and workshops starting in the early morning and ending in the late afternoon. The exhibitors were eager to demonstrate their products and share their knowledge. The weather was perfect, eclipsed only by the quality of the food served at the local restaurants. It was a wonderful experience; however, I must do it again in a few weeks, and again shortly after that, and again and again and again.

During the last several years, there have been more and more dermatology meetings. There are local meetings, regional meetings, national meetings, subspecialty meetings, society meetings, multispecialty meetings, academy meetings, and winter, spring, summer, and fall meetings. There are meetings at sea, at home, and abroad. There are even meetings that celebrate holidays, weekends, dead presidents, and specific body parts or diseases. Where will it end? Should it end? Where did it all begin?

There have always been a sufficient number of meetings in dermatology. Our meeting history was, and to some extent still is, defined by geography and association. We have meetings that represent our interests from the grand perspective, such as the American Academy of Dermatology's annual meeting. Other meetings represent boundaries within which we live and practice, including the oldest continuously held meeting in the United States, the Pacific Northwest Dermatological Conference. Some meetings are associated with particular areas of specialty, such as meetings organized by the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery (ASCDA) and the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS), which focus on procedural dermatology. Other meetings represent clubs or groups with similar interests, training, or allegiance. Some meetings represent the interests of a recognized society or foundation, whereas others represent financial self-interest.

The author reports no conflict of interest in relation to this article.

There are meetings that are not-for-profit, some that are industry linked, and others designed to maximize profit potential for dermatologists, businesses that own them, or both. This is where the water begins to get muddy. The harsh reality is that meetings depend on industry support to make ends meet. It does not depend on size, scope, scale, or location because meetings in our specialty of dermatology do not pay their own way. In fact, many meetings would not even exist if it were not for industry support, which totals well into the millions of dollars just for dermatology each year.

My concern is not the content or value of the meetings; it is that the meetings have become overpopulated. The sheer number, frequency, and overlap of the meeting calendar is testimony to the need for a limit.

Now, I am not going to go off on a tangent or diatribe about the evils of industry. In fact, I am a staunch supporter of the partnership between industry and dermatology. This partnership works in the best interest of our mutual concern, the patients. Without this partnership, dermatology as a specialty and dermatology meetings would exist on an entirely different level.

Industry financial support is essential and critical for a robust, diversified, and balanced scientific program agenda. We have continuing medical education accreditation to play referee, and it does this well. In a Darwinian fashion, meetings that become irrelevant, stale, and boring fall to the wayside and are replaced by those that are fresh, exciting, and relevant to the needs and concerns of the attendees. Meetings have life cycles; they are either reborn or they wither on the vine of obsolescence.

My concern is not the content or value of the meetings; it is that the meetings have become overpopulated. The sheer number, frequency, and overlap of the meeting calendar is testimony to the need for a limit; however, being

the market theorist that I am, I believe that if there are truly too many meetings, the meeting market will auto-correct over time to produce a more efficient calendar. At least, it should if all other things are equal; however, things are not always equal in our niche of the world.

As I mentioned previously, the financial funding of meetings from industry provides long-term life support. The support from industry is significant in scope and considerable in value. Dermatologists have become dependant on this life support. If it were to be withdrawn, dermatologists would most likely suffer a seizure. Meetings without industry support would be like rainy days at the beach.

I, for one, enjoy the opportunity to teach, learn, network, and socialize with colleagues at dermatology meetings. I feel that they are an important and integral component of my professional development. I am a better physician and dermatologist because of the time I spend at meetings.

So, what is the point I am trying to make in this editorial? Simply put, I believe we have too many meetings for the size and scope of our specialty of dermatology. We have begun to experience redundancy in content, venue, value and logistics. I call this the meeting hassle factor. There are too many meetings covering the same topics at considerable expense.

Dermatologists are responsible for this predicament. We have become dependant on subsidies from our industry partners, who also share the blame. Industry has allowed us, by virtue of their graciousness, to feed at the trough for far too long. It has enabled us to continue because it writes the checks for the overhead. It is similar to big government.

Given the difficult economic time that we are in, I propose that some of our generous partners are going to begin the long, slow, and painful process of withdrawal

from meeting addiction. While it will be tough for all of us, some will feel the pain more than others. Meetings will be forced to shut down, reinvent themselves, merge, or otherwise adapt to the changing landscape of the economy. Some meetings will do this better than others with inventive and ingenious responses, whereas others will cling to their old habits and lifestyles until they become outdated. In a way, industry will be doing us a favor as it forces us to face the new reality of tougher times. This is tough love.

As the 2009 president of ASCDAS, I speak from experience when I say that this reality has already begun to affect the meeting calendar. In 2009, ASCDAS and ASDS will offer their members a joint meeting. This program will offer a bigger piece of the pie for everyone interested in procedural dermatology. There will be more lectures, more demonstrations, more exhibits, and most of all, more opportunities to learn from each other.

This joint meeting was envisioned by 2 forward-thinking colleagues, Ranella Hirsch, MD, from ASCDAS and Robert Weiss, MD, from ASDS, who, with the full and unequivocal support of their respective boards, had the foresight and vision to anticipate the changing landscape and act accordingly. Their bold strategy to be proactive has already begun to reap rewards and it sets the stage for others to follow. Unity brings forth strength and collegiality. I applaud Drs. Hirsch and Weiss for their willingness to take risks and for the benefits that are certain to follow.

I hope that all the readers of *Cosmetic Dermatology*[®] will attend the joint ASCDAS/ASDS meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, this fall to celebrate our innovative approach to the meeting calendar.

Wm. Philip Werschler, MD
Seattle, Washington

