

## EDITOR'S CORNER

### Oral Versus Poster Presentation

I just came back from several national and international scientific meetings and had a great time absorbing a large volume of information from a very diverse group of scientists. Many of the presentations were excellent, but I have some thoughts about oral versus poster presentations in scientific meetings.

When I was a student in the late 60's there was no such thing as a poster session. All of us young graduate students, US and internationals alike, had to orally present our research works in front of a large audience. It was quite an experience. First of all, for us non-US students speaking English was hard enough let alone speaking in front of a large group of scientists, some of whom were the most distinguished scientists in the world.

I remember, first I had to make good slides, then I had to practice a million times alone and sometimes in front of my critical major professor. When the moment arrived as I went into the dark and large hall full of people and sat in the front row I started sweating and even shaking a bit. All of a sudden I had an urge to go to the restroom (Why do they call it a "restroom"? I never saw anyone resting there!) and ran to find one, which was unusually far away. After the matter was taken care of I came back to my seat and realized that I was the next one to give the talk. The sweat started again. Well, finally my name was called and I thought I was going to the guillotine. And then I was there opening my mouth and hearing some familiar words come out and saw myself describing some works I had done and at the same time making sure that my talk was within twelve minutes. It was a very long twelve minutes, like an hour. And finally I finished and I heard some complimentary or obligatory applause. Then the dreaded moment of someone asking a question. Well, I thought I answered it OK. At long last the Chair said, "Thank you, Dr. Fung". Who, me? I was not a doctor, I was not even a nurse. Anyway, it was GREAT walking back to my seat and my major professor gave me a handshake and I felt the entire world was off my shoulders. I GAVE MY VERY FIRST IFT TALK! It was an exhilarating experience. From then on I gave many talks and became more and more relaxed and even put in a couple of humorous lines to make the talk enjoyable.

I am afraid with the recent decision of the American Society for Microbiology to discontinue having oral presentation for research works and totally going to poster sessions and the reduction of oral presentations at the

Institute of Food Technologists and other scientific societies, a whole generation of budding scientists will not have the experience of speaking to an unknown audience. There is nothing to replace my first experience as a speaker in a national meeting and I feel sad to say that many of my own students will not have that unparalleled experience in the future.

There are, of course, many arguments against fifteen minute oral presentations.

Such as:

Too short a time to do enough good;

National meetings are not the place to train graduate students;

Some speakers are too hard to understand, especially foreigners;

Too expensive to rent a room for only a limited number of oral presentations;

Slides are poorly presented and information is passing by too fast, etc.,etc.

Arguments for poster sessions are many.

Such as:

Closer interactions between presenters and audience;

More detailed discussions between scientists;

A scientist can pick and choose the posters in a shorter time;

Many more posters can be placed in one large area at any one time to save a lot of money for the organizers, etc.,etc.

Negative points on posters include:

A presenter has to block off at least two hours to stay with the poster and thus cannot learn as much from other posters or programs;

Long discussions with one or two persons results in ignoring other interested parties;

Some posters are much more popular than others resulting in one presenter having a large number of people constantly gathering around and another poor soul "begging" for eye contact and a friendly visit;

Carrying the poster around an airport is not the most convenient thing to do.

However, I must admit that posters are now so well and so professionally done that I am glad my first poster (constructed on the airplane on my way to Hawaii) was not placed next to one of those Harvard Graphics, Hollywood productions of 1996.

Well, I think both methods have their good and negative points but my first talk still lingers in my memory of youthful days when my mouth went dry before the twelve minutes were up. Have a great presentation next time-oral or poster.

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