

RUTH D. WILLIAMS, MD

## What's in a Virtual Meeting?

There's a cadence to our professional lives. For me, it begins in February with Glaucoma 360 and the Academy board meeting, followed by the American Glaucoma Society's annual meeting. This culminates in the Academy's annual meeting, a gathering so iconic it's commonly called The Academy.

But in this *annus horribilis*, the last in-person meeting for me was the Illinois Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons clinical conference on March 6. Once COVID-related restrictions were put in place, organizations abruptly transitioned to virtual meetings.

Most of us have now attended an online ophthalmology meeting. So, how are they? Virtual meetings have some advantages. I attended the World Ophthalmology Congress from my blue sofa, a meeting that normally would have required nearly 20 hours in transit to attend in person. It was relaxing to listen to sessions while wearing jeans and drinking coffee from the same cup I use every morning.

But what is missing? One talk I wanted to hear was at 2:15 a.m. my time, although the link was available later. Because most of us aren't used to talking into a webcam, both live and prerecorded talks can be stiff, even boring (although it's entertaining to study the background of someone's home). Traveling to a meeting releases us from quotidian work, but attending virtually also is affected by myriad home-based distractions. Technical glitches can be disruptive as attendees and speakers learn new platforms. Recently, I missed half of a named lecture because I couldn't find the link.

As the pandemic continues, organizations have had more time to develop their meetings and learn what works. Perhaps the most important lesson is that a successful conference doesn't take the content from an in-person meeting and slap it into a virtual format. Just as a well-delivered speech has different language and cadence than a well-written essay, a virtual meeting is quite different from an in-person one.

What does this mean for this year's Academy meeting? Maria Aaron, Academy secretary for the Annual Meeting, said, "Our November meeting is not some Zoom call or a prerecorded session. It's not a transition; it's a reinvention." Maria described a menu of events that include a daily Opening Session, live panels, poster sessions, and the ever-popular

Academy Café. Content will start early in the morning and continue into the evening. Instead of the complex array of choices, there will be four or five tracks to select from at any time. "The Academy does things with sheer excellence," Maria said, "so I'm inviting ophthalmologists to attend the meeting out of curiosity. The feel of it is super exciting."

Some have questioned the meeting's \$425 price tag. Debra Rosencrance, Academy vice president for meetings and exhibits, explained that while part of the annual meeting has been free for members, much of the content (such as Subspecialty Day and the course pass) requires an à la carte charge. "It's impossible to run a creative, integrated meeting with some content that's free and some that requires a payment," Debra said. "The single payment provides access to everything, including practice management material and 70 hours of CME—and the content is available for a full year." And as she noted, for most people, "the charge is less than a plane ticket to Las Vegas."

There are many losses this year, and although most of them are small, they are cumulative. As the year drags on, increasingly I'm missing the camaraderie and the friendship of my ophthalmology colleagues. There is power in presence, and no virtual meeting will ever replace that. However, we are invited to try this new format for education. AAO 2020 Virtual isn't a temporary substitute for the real thing; it's an innovative and exciting option.

When we *are* able to meet in person again, I'll relish the impromptu discussion in the corridor, the vibrancy of an interactive Q&A session, and the feel of being together in one place. But the virtual meeting born of this pandemic will become more sophisticated, and it will retain a place in our professional lives. See you (virtually) at The Academy.



**Ruth D. Williams, MD**  
Chief Medical Editor, EyeNet