

Current Perspective

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AAO 2021—Implementing Change in a Time of Crisis

Last spring, the Academy considered options for the annual meeting in New Orleans—an in-person meeting, a purely virtual meeting, or an in-person meeting with a strong virtual component (a “hybrid” meeting). It was not a straightforward decision.

After the purely virtual meeting in 2020, we learned several things. (1) Some members loved the virtual meeting because they could access educational content whenever they wanted and as many times as they wanted. (2) Some members loved the virtual meeting because it didn’t take them away from practices and family, and travel costs were eliminated. (3) Some members hated the virtual meeting because they missed seeing friends and the opportunities for professional networking and live interactive learning. (4) Some members hated the virtual meeting because they couldn’t join Skills Transfer courses or effectively peruse the exhibit floor. (Other pros and cons were expressed in our postmeeting survey.)

The Academy therefore decided to pursue a hybrid meeting, realizing that we had eight months to revisit the decision. This was, for the Academy, the most costly of the three options. The virtual component for a meeting of our size comes with incremental, significant costs for software platforms, content acquisition, and content management. Meeting revenue decreases. But we selected the hybrid approach to meet the preferences of the greatest number of members.

The Delta variant reared its head in the summer, and cases and deaths rose in many parts of the country. Many large medical meetings scheduled for August through October were canceled. The Academy again faced the decision whether to go forward with the meeting and whether to have a policy regarding mask use and vaccination. With five months still to go, we decided to continue planning for a hybrid option but to simultaneously develop contingency plans for a conversion to all virtual. The mask decision was made for us, as both Louisiana and New Orleans had mask mandates.

The overarching objective was to make the meeting as safe as possible for those who chose to attend. We reached out to the infectious disease and public health communities for expert, scientific input. The preponderance of evidence demonstrated that vaccination provided substantively better protection than did postinfection antibodies against severe

disease requiring hospitalization. The membership was surveyed as to vaccination status in late spring; at that time, 96% of members were vaccinated. While recognizing that this would not permit attendance by a small subset of the membership, the Board of Trustees voted to mandate vaccination as the only permitted route to in-person meeting attendance. (This same decision was reached by nearly all other medical societies that have held in-person meetings.)

Building on recommendations from a 2019 strategic review of the annual meeting conducted prior to COVID, numerous other changes were made, including shortening the total meeting, moving the Opening Session to Friday, incorporating a Closing Session, changing course timing to improve manageability, and others. Overall, difficult decisions were made, and major changes were implemented.

So how did it all turn out? Over 9,800 people attended the in-person annual meeting. While lower than pre-COVID, this was among the largest medical meetings in the world in 2021! Over 4,800 additional people registered for the virtual component of this hybrid meeting. The Academy is unaware of any members who tested positive for COVID-19 at the meeting or shortly thereafter. (Statistically speaking, there should be a few.)

Initial survey results show what many of us experienced at the meeting. Those who attended were absolutely giddy to be back in person with friends and colleagues from around the country—including hundreds who braved quarantine risks to travel internationally.

As for 2022, I look forward to seeing you all in Chicago. Hopefully, the combination of vaccinations and/or treatments will make in-person attendance available to all members wherever they practice. And, yes, we anticipate that a virtual option will remain available. Here’s to 2022!!



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