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Opportunities and challenges for international societies in the COVID-19 era

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Introduction

Lisa Hui

Associate Editor, Prenatal Diagnosis

As the year 2020 draws to a conclusion, it is clear that the way we work and communicate with our colleagues will never be the same again. As members of the scientific community, we have each played a part in formulating and implementing local pandemic responses at a hospital, laboratory, research institute and regional level.

Our multidisciplinary field of prenatal diagnosis has not taken a “furlough” during 2020. Pregnancy and childbirth do not pause for pandemics, and we have all continued to care for mothers and babies throughout the disruptions of lockdowns, personal protective equipment shortages, stressed health services and economic downturns.

However, despite travel restrictions across the globe, we have managed to stay connected through the lifeline of modern technology. Our international societies have played a huge part in maintaining a sense of community and supporting the rapid dissemination of knowledge and clinical guidance during the pandemic. While we disappointedly cancelled plans for conferences where we hoped to catch up with old colleagues and meet new ones, we enthusiastically planned virtual alternatives, opening up opportunities for greater audience reach, and reducing our carbon footprint on the planet.

In this commentary, we have invited two leaders in our field to reflect on the challenges that the pandemic has created for professional societies this year and to give us their vision of the future shape of our global community. It is more important than ever to support the work of our professional societies so that we can continue to advance the care of women and babies through these uncertain times.

Revitalizing ISPD's mission during a pandemic

Louise-Wilkins Haug

President, International Society for Prenatal Diagnosis 2018-2020

2020 is a pivotal year for global health. ISPD, a society of geneticists, maternal fetal experts, fetal therapists, counselors, imagers and laboratory specialists remains committed to the equitable provision of prenatal genetics and fetal care to all women and their families. The challenges of obtaining updated scientific information, maintaining an awareness of emerging technologies and the development of the next generation of scientists loom even larger as travel is restricted, health care resources depleted, and borders closed.

ISPD is dedicated to addressing these challenges. We pivoted during the past year to focus on these concerns, fortifying existing programs and introducing new initiatives. Communication and connection within the global community is essential. Global Updates, sent to all on the ISPD mailing list, is a brief newsletter with timely links, and open access to *Prenatal Diagnosis*' editor's choice articles. Previously distributed every three months, this communication will now appear monthly. Additionally, the ISPD Corporate Council, assembled in 2018, also quickly stepped forward to assure scientific education continued. This council, comprised of commercial entities closely related to the goals of ISPD, contribute on a yearly basis to an education fund. Starting in Oct, this education fund is sponsoring interactive virtual sessions including the popular debate series and plenary speakers from the cancelled June annual meeting. Continuing education credits, interaction through polling systems and virtual "break out" rooms will reach many more individuals than at annual meetings. The ISPD Global Outreach and Education committee is working on further virtual programs. To address the current challenges and also reshape the reach of a global society, remote learning which is interactive, accessible, and timely remains at the top of ISPD's strategic plan for the next 5 years.

Lastly, senior members of any society share a responsibility to mentor, promote and support the next generation. At in person meetings, introducing trainees and junior faculty who are seeking guidance, jobs or research collaboration, historically occurred over coffee or after a presentation. Replacing these opportunities and further reaching individuals who could not attend a meeting is paramount to supporting the scientific field and the continued development of a global society. ISPD's existing Engaging the Next Generation (ENG) initiative is being further fortified with ongoing contributions to the online "toolkit" of resources for developing a scientific career. Shortly an online community will launch geared to the next generation as a space for connection, job posting and goal specific mentorship.

This is a time of learning and adjustment for all. Senior society members, perhaps less facile with virtual connection, will need to push beyond their comfort zone to benefit from the skills of those to whom these remote links are seamless. And alternatively, those more junior can continue to be supported by contributed virtual resources and introductions made by established members. All will benefit from global, easy access to scientific advances, opportunities for collaboration and ongoing education. As new paths to connecting the global society are introduced, we encourage our membership to get involved, shape the next 5 years, and solidify ISPD's role in global health.

Making a virtue of necessity

Joris A. Veltman

Chair, Scientific Program Committee, European Society of Human Genetics 2020

Our 53rd annual ESHG conference was to take place in Berlin this year on June 6-9. By the 3rd of April it was 100% clear that there would not be a conference in Berlin and we decided to move to an online conference, to be held on the original dates for a registration fee of 100 euros. While we were all excited about this, we didn't know whether the online platform would work well, whether attendees would register and pay for this conference, whether speakers would be willing to pre-record their talks and whether sponsors would support us. We did, however, also see this as a great opportunity to try something new and imagined that many colleagues would long for a scientific conference after months of lockdown. In addition, the affordable online forum would allow attendees to join in from all over the world, many of whom would normally not consider joining our conference. In the end, most things indeed worked out very well: The online platform crashed for 10 minutes on day 1 but that turned out to be the only serious technological issue we had. Most attendees responded very relaxed and appreciated the online opportunities such as asking questions by chat and the possibility to see presentations at a later moment on-demand. In addition, almost all speakers pre-recorded their presentations, sponsors did support us and a record number of 5,561 people registered for our online ESHG (in comparison, in 2019 we welcomed 3,497 attendees at our meeting in Gothenburg, Sweden).

Yes, as expected, attendees most of all missed meeting each other, using the conference to catch up with old friends and colleagues, set-up new collaborations and network. That is something that an online conference cannot and will never fully replace. But at the same time there are many reasons why online conferences are here to stay. One of the major reasons is that online conferences allow people to attend who normally would not be able to do so because of cost, time, caring duties and/or distance. In these challenging times for science it may be the affordable option for many of us, and it has the added benefit of reducing our carbon footprint. In addition, the online platforms will rapidly improve and allow you to interact better with speakers and poster presenters, as well as with other attendees and sponsors.

For next year we are planning a hybrid model for our ESHG conference, with the option for people to attend the conference in Glasgow or online, ask questions in person or by chat, and look back presentations afterwards. A reduced number of physical attendees may be a consequence that is not necessarily negative for our attendees and our society, as it facilitates physical distancing and allows our conference to take place in more convention centres around Europe, not be limited to a few very large

venues. We may also invite a number of top speakers to give online presentations instead of flying to Glasgow, allowing us to present work that otherwise perhaps would not be presented. Finally, the online platform also offers us new opportunities to organise and distribute our online courses, and work more closely together with other societies to offer genetics courses for various specialties.

In conclusion, the COVID19 pandemic has forced us all to rethink the organisation of scientific conferences and has allowed for new online opportunities to be integrated in exciting new hybrid meetings.