

Scientific and educational concerns in medical students' congresses: The elephant in the room

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To the Editor,

Medical student congresses (MSCs) have been organized for about 15 years in Turkey. In the last 5 years, the number of organized congresses have increased exponentially - more than 20 congresses took place in the 2012-2013 academic year. These congresses are organized mainly by student clubs and communities. Indeed, the content of a congress is the most important factor for the scientific process; it provides valuable contribution and sharing experiences to the participants. In Turkey, the general practitioners and specialists organize congresses in their respective fields of study regularly. It has been known that these congresses have primary and secondary objectives. Primary objectives consist of sharing and discussing scientific topics that have been updated over time, listening to experienced specialists' and authors' presentations, presenting new research data and planning further investigations for the progress of scientific knowledge. Secondary objectives can be summarized as resting and socializing.

MSCs should be evaluated thoroughly for their primary and secondary objectives. These objectives can be summarized for the MSC participants as: having updated information about general medicine, conducting and presenting research, having discussions on topics and presentations, learning how scientific information is created and passed on; but not discussions of medical specialty or subspecialty topics. Secondary objectives could be socializing with other students. But even for the active participants, those presenting research, the primary objectives are being replaced by the secondary ones.

It may be necessary to discuss primary and secondary aims of the organization committees. The MSCs have been organized mainly by student clubs and communities. A few faculties in Turkey have a programme that includes a faculty-student club partnership. The most important factor for this partnership should be an educational programme that motivates and encourages students to conducting research.

An important point to consider is the switch between secondary objectives and primary objectives. A very active social programme may get ahead of the scientific programme. From the organizers view, this approach sometimes may be favored, since the secondary objectives - such as being able to compete with other student clubs and their congresses, making a name for the faculty or the club - may be predominant and replace the primary objectives.

The mistakes in MSCs will be better understood if they are categorized. Some of the common mistakes are:

- A scientific committee either does not exist or is inadequate.
- Calls for abstracts are not organized in a proper way; some presentations are invited while bypassing the scientific committee.
- Presenters who present the work of others are accepted.
- Reviews with unacceptable methodology, i.e. subjective reviews are accepted.
- Reviews from presenters having no expertise or no expert mentor for their subject are accepted.
- There is no standard method available for assessing presentations.
- Papers with different levels of evidence are assessed together.

It is not known how many of the points raised above are discussed by organizers of MSCs until today. Just observing the MSCs would not get evidence based results. Organizers must aim to prevent these mistakes in order for all to benefit more from MSCs. For this reason, my suggestion is that the collaboration of national medical organizations - such as the Turkish Medical Association- be asked to work with organizing committees, planning workshops to identify and offer solutions for mistakes so that MSCs can be more efficient in both scientific and social areas.

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