Of No Significant Benefit

You can almost feel the belts tightening. In the quest for greater clinical “productivity,” academic and private institutions are taking a close look at activities that do not directly add to clinical profits. Directly in the line of fire are continuing medical education (CME) activities, including attendance at national and international meetings. While most academic institutions still recognize the value of presentations at meetings and rounds at other institutions, life is tougher for the junior faculty member who does not have departmental or grant funds to help defray the cost of attending a meeting. Even harsher regulations are sometimes placed on employees of managed care organizations as these corporations can take a dim view of their physician employees “wasting time” at meetings.

Is meeting attendance really such a waste of time? Leaving town is clearly an interruption of family time, practice time, and academic time. On returning from a meeting, I approach the stack of mail and messages with roughly the same enthusiasm that I approach cleaning the gutters of leaves each autumn. Why would we want to do this to ourselves?

Probably the greatest benefit in attending meetings is access: to colleagues, to fresh ideas, to books and equipment for sale in the exhibit hall, to CME credits. This access allows practitioners and scientists, young and seasoned, to meet directly with the leaders and the future leaders in the field. Young researchers get critical outside review of their data. Clinicians get a break from the business of medicine in order to recharge their batteries and to concentrate on updating their knowledge, as this is often difficult to accomplish in a busy practice setting.

What is the value of meeting attendance to a university or managed care organization? Potential benefits are, admittedly, more intangible. When faculty present their work at meetings, this is thought to enhance the prestige of their home institution. Both universities and managed care organizations have a vested interest in advancing knowledge in order to provide more effective, more efficient, and if possible, less costly care. The opportunity to hear the latest information and to share this with colleagues, also known as the schmooze factor, is often only available at meetings.

As an academic physician, I have found that meeting attendance is one of the best ways to establish grant funding and collaboration. Each year at a national meeting, many of the investigators in my field of airway secretion research (the “mucus mafia” as Professor Y. Sakakura calls us) get together for an annual Phlegmish Masters dinner. Although this is mostly an informal gathering of colleagues from around the world, invariably this dinner leads to new friendships and collaborations. I am quite sure that other meeting attendees also work in schmooze time for their friends and colleagues. For many physicians, meetings are a unique opportunity not only to discuss medicine but also to see friends and show off the latest photos of children and grandchildren. All of this can make for happier and more fulfilled practitioners balancing the hassles of being away from the office.

What can be done to make meetings of more significant benefit to everyone? Those of us who plan meetings need to hear from the universities and the managed care organizations, as well as from the physician attendees so that we can understand your expectations. If you have ideas for adding value to our meetings, I want to hear them. Please write to me in care of the American College of Chest Physicians, with any suggestions, and I will see that they get to the people who plan our meetings and educational programs.

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Accepting the “Guideline” Challenge

Telling the readers of CHEST about the serious need for people to quit smoking may be preaching to the choir. It is unlikely that any chest physician or patient in the 1990s is unaware of the tremendous health costs attributable to tobacco smoking. But in any congregation, there may be believers who are uncertain of their ability to sing praises, or who feel that singing is not