

“Once around the world ...” Unsolicited congress invitations via e-mail

For some years now, scientifically active people have been the recipients of e-mails that advertise for their participation in two-, three- and sometimes even four-day conferences. It is not uncommon for the recipients to be offered the opportunity to attend as speakers or chairpersons. Specialist literature on this topic can easily be overviewed, as it is rather limited [1–10, 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, 23–26, 29–35]. For most publications, short articles, such as editorials or letters to the editors, are involved. There are very few data-based analyses of this phenomenon [6, 27]. In the only article in the field of dentistry to date, the British periodontist Peter Heasman describes his experiences with the organizers of such meetings [17].

In order to get an overview of the extent of this nuisance from a dental point of view, the e-mails received at my address <jens.tuerp@unibas.ch> (including spam folder) between the 1st and 31st of January 2020 were collected and assessed.

Results

In the reporting period, 38 mails were received. These messages referred to 32 congresses which one should attend or at which one should hold presentations. The remaining 6 mails were inquiries (“we have contacted you before [...]”).

The 32 events took place or are taking place in 23 cities which are attractive to tourists in 16 Asian, European and North American countries (Tab. 1).

Three out of four e-mails were not related to the subject (Table 2), i.e., only 8 of the conferences were related to dentistry (Table 3). Each of

these events is organized by a different company.

The participation fees are high, as documented in Table 3 using the example of holding a lecture (“[academic] speaker registration”).

Assessment

It is noticeable that most e-mails refer to conferences that have nothing to do with dentistry. Other authors reported similar findings [6, 27]. The dermatologists Jakhar and Kaur

Country	Number	City
Japan	5	Osaka (4), Tokyo
Italy	4	Rome (2), Milan, Venice
China	3	Dalian (2), Chengdu
Canada	3	Vancouver (2), Toronto
Spain	3	Barcelona (2), Valencia
Germany	2	Berlin
Portugal	2	Lisbon
USA	2	Dallas, Las Vegas
England	1	London
France	1	Paris
Greece	1	Thessaloniki
Malaysia	1	Kuala Lumpur
Poland	1	Cracow
Czech Republic	1	Prague
Singapore	1	Singapore
Thailand	1	Bangkok

Table 1 The 16 host countries and their respective cities, ranked by the number of conferences

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therefore rightly ask: “What will a dermatologist gain out of a petrochemical conference?” [18].

Offering conferences in popular cities seems to be a profitable business model for the organizers, despite the high fees they charge. According to its own statement, the website of Conference Series LLC Ltd¹, which is the largest organizer of such events and a subsidiary of OMICS Publishing Group², lists an impressive number of events held in Europe, Asia as well as North and South America. The titles of the congresses presented often contain adjectives such as “International,” “World,” and “Global.”

Nevertheless, doubts seem to be justified with regards to the organizers. All 8 organizers of the dental conferences are on the “Questionable Conferences” list of the library of the renowned California Institute of Technology (Caltech Library)³. Among these is an Indian publishing group which was sentenced to a fine of over 50 million US dollars by the District Court in Nevada in April 2019 because “they made deceptive claims to academics and researchers about the nature of their conferences and publications, and hid steep publication fees” [14].

The investigative journalist (and medical layman) Peter Onneken has documented on film how such conferences take place [28]. He pretended to be the research director of a (non-existent) Cologne “Institute for Diet and Health.” With a biography modified for this purpose and a bumpy, apparently unreviewed congress abstract (“The impact of *Salvia hispanica* L. enhanced nutrition on breast cancer prevention”⁴), he managed to easily give a “scientific” lecture at the “7th World Congress on Breast Cancer” in Frankfurt am Main in May 2018. In the film, you can see how Onneken prepares his presentation the evening before his lecture:

Conference Title
11th Neurotalk’s Brain Health Conference
International Conference on Neurology & Neuro Disorders
International Conference on Alzheimer’s Disease & Dementia
3rd International Conference on Addiction Therapy and Clinical Reports
International Conference on Emergency and Critical Care Medicine
World Congress on Geriatrics and Palliative Care
Orthopedics and Rheumatology World Forum
World Conference on Osteoarthritis and its Complications
World Congress on Pain Research & Management
39th Annual The European Society of Regional Anaesthesia & Pain Therapy (ESRA) Congress
World Congress on ENT
Global Congress on Nephrology & Urology
Preventive Medicine and Healthcare Congress
13th Annual World Cancer Congress
3rd Edition of Nursing & Healthcare
Nursing, Practice and Care
International Conference on Cell Science & Tissue Science
Association for Molecular Pathology (AMP) Europe 2020 Congress
11th Annual World DNA and Genome Day-2020
4th International Conference on Biological Information and Biomedical Engineering
8th Annual Conference of AnalytiX-2020
4th Global Summit on Nanotechnology
Nano Science and Technology-2020
Global Conference on Plastic Aesthetic and Reconstructive Surgery

Table 2 The titles of the 24 conferences unrelated to dentistry

1. www.conferenceseries.com (last access: April 6, 2020)

2. www.omicsgroup.org (last access: April 6, 2020)

3. Caltech: Open Access / Predatory Publishers / Questionable Conferences: Home. Last updated: April 3, 2020. <https://libguides.caltech.edu/c.php?g=512665> (last access: April 6, 2020)

4. Abstract: www.omicsonline.org/conference-proceedings/1948-5956-C2-125-004.pdf (last access: April 6, 2020)

6th Global Summit and Expo on Dental and Oral Health	Cracow	Scientific Federation, India	March 23–24, 2020	\$699 – \$799 – \$899 (early bird, standard, on spot registration)
3rd International Conference on Dentistry, Implantology and Oral Health	Berlin	Cientific Group, Singapore	March 18–19, 2020	\$ 699
International Conference on Dentistry and Integrated Medicine	Osaka	Ology Mavens, Canada/India	April, 29–30, 2020	\$699 – \$799 – \$899 (early bird, standard, on spot registration)
IDF-2020: Transforming the Face of Dentistry	Lisbon	Innovinc Intcon Pvt Ltd, India	June 15–17, 2020	\$699 – \$799 – \$899 (early bird, mid-on, final registration)
Global Conference on Clinical Dentistry and Oral Health	Dallas	Moraft Corporation, USA	June 11–12, 2020	\$599 – \$699 – \$799 (early bird, standard, event day)
International Congress on Clinical Dentistry and Practice	Vancouver	Peers Alley Media, Canada	July 20–21, 2020	\$599 – \$699 – \$799 (early bird, standard, event day)
Annual Congress on Oral Care & Dentistry	Tokyo	Conference Series LLC LTD (OMICs Publishing Group) India	September 16–17, 2020	\$650 – \$740 – \$830 (early bird, standard, final call)
World Congress on Dentistry and Oral Health	Singapore	Axiomatic Conferences, England	March 25–26, 2021	\$799 – \$899 – \$999 (early bird, standard, on spot)

Table 3 The 8 dental conferences with their respective title, city, organizer, date, and cost of the event

“I’m something like the headliner for day two. I am giving the opening speech. I’m speaking on the role of Salvia hispanica in breast cancer prevention. Now I’m copying Wikipedia.”

Shortly before his presentation he goes on to record:

“And now I have to see how far I can go with my copy-paste speech, which I made last night.”

And he continues:

“Now it’s the time to keep my cool. And then I’ll just read from Wikipedia. Word for word. More bad than good. Nobody says anything. And the rest of my speech is also generalizations. Or a copied-together article. The congress participants seem to find it normal. I did it! And the professor even has praise for me.”

For his research, Onneken was awarded the journalist prize “Evi-

dence-Based Medicine in Media” from the German Network for Evidence-Based Medicine (DNEBM) in 2019.

Similar reports from participants of such conferences can be found on the Internet [12, 16, 22].

However, this does not mean that the presentations at these events are without exception of poor quality, although Eduardo Franco (McGill University, Montreal) noted [16]:

“Some of our junior faculty and respected senior professors attended these conferences because they thought they were in bone fide, but once they got there, they realized how small and Mickey Mouse they were.”

Conclusions

The available evidence suggests that the organizers of such “congresses” are not concerned with scientifically ac-

ceptable content or scientific exchange, but with profit maximization: “Predatory conferences are thought to primarily seek profits, in a pay-to-play model where researchers give money to speak at the event. Consequently, predatory conference organizers may have little concern for the quality or rigor of the abstracts they accept or the speakers they invite” [6].

“Like predatory journals, predatory conferences may undermine our science and clinical practice through the dissemination of questionable information or presentation to an inappropriate audience.”

Annette M. Bourgault, editor of the magazine “CriticalCareNurse” [4]

The following tips offer a good indication of whether or not a conference is a predatory conference. Not all points will necessarily be relevant to the conference in question; what decisive is is the overall impression.

1. You have never heard of this conference.
2. You are invited to the conference via e-mail, possibly even to hold the keynote lecture.
3. Neither you nor anyone in your field has ever attended the conference.
4. Searching online for “predatory conference <conference name>” or “predatory conference <organizer>” results in hits and reviews.
5. The conference website on the Internet looks unprofessional; important information is not provided.
6. The fees given deviate substantially from the average; they are often well hidden.
7. The title of the conference is extremely vague.
8. The program details of the conference have no clear structure or are incomplete.
9. A beautiful conference setting is advertised (sometimes holiday destinations or cruise ships).
10. Prominent figures, for example Nobel Prize Laureates, are listed in advertisements.
11. The conference is backed by a multitude of particularly renowned sponsors, often with no relation to the conference topic.
12. There is the promise of extremely fast acceptance processes for the conference contributions or abstracts.
13. There are no clear information on the peer review process or on the publication of conference contributions.
14. Publications resulting from the conference in previous years cannot be found in any of the usual scientific sources.

Table 4 Checklist “Predatory Conferences” of the Jülich Research Center [15]

(Courtesy of Jülich Research Center)

Striking features which typically recur in connection with such events include (besides the characteristics listed in Table 4) (cf. [3, 6, 8, 24, 29]):

- invitation to a conference in a different field
- markedly polite, flattering letters (“a celebrated leader in the field”)
- offer to appear as a speaker, keynote speaker and/or member of the organizing committee (without the usual waiver of participation fees for legitimate congresses)
- striking similarity of the conference titles with those of scientifically honest conferences
- conference organization by companies without reference to or participation of professional societies or universities
- the use of names and photographs of scientists on the website to promote the conference without their permission or knowledge
- hardly any information about the members of the congress committee
- no direct contact persons listed on the website
- linguistically incorrect texts in e-mails and/or on the website
- minimal or inexact information about the congress program
- no information about the exact venue in the city in question (usually a hotel)
- high participation fees (some of which are not fully disclosed until after participation has been confirmed)
- unusually rapid acceptance of conference abstracts, regardless of their quality
- obvious lack of qualitative appraisal of the submitted texts
- inadequate on-site organization
- announcement of speakers, but their lack of appearance
- low number of participants
- participants who only appear for a short time and disappear relatively quickly
- largely unknown speakers
- unusually broad, sometimes multidisciplinary range of lecture topics
- parallel congresses on different topics at the same location⁵
- merging of conferences from different fields, which take place simultaneously in the same location, into a single event

Bogus conference
Dubious conference
Fake conference
Flaky conference
Fraudulent conference
Hijacked conference
Predatory conference
Sham conference
Sketchy conference
Questionable conference
Vanity conference

Table 5 English terms for questionable conferences (“fake conferences”) (Tab. 1–3 and Tab. 5: Türp)

- excessive awarding of “awards”
- no refund of congress fees in case of cancellation of participation or cancellation of the event
- publication of conference contribution without the speakers’ permission and knowledge

“I strongly recommend that all researchers and clinicians from all countries avoid these meetings.”

Peter A. Heasman, Professor Emeritus of Periodontology, School of Dental Sciences, Newcastle upon Tyne, England [17].

The common English terms used to characterize such events are summarized in Table 5. In German one speaks of “Scheinkonferenzen” or “Raubkonferenzen”.

Recommendation

Participation at these conferences, or more precisely, at these commercially-oriented fake meetings with seminar character, can negatively influence one’s scientific career [4]. Education is therefore necessary [19], particularly because the Internet does not forget anything [11]. In addition to the suggestions given under “Conclusions,” the “Checklist Predatory Conferences” [15] published by the Jülich Research Center can serve as an aid in order to identify shady, profit-driven events in advance (Table 4) and thus prevent the waste of money, time, and reputation.

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