

## EDITORIAL

# Congresses and predatory publications, a new factor to consider<sup>☆</sup>



## Congresos y publicaciones depredadoras, un nuevo factor a tener en cuenta

For some years now I have been receiving inputs from different channels and although they have not been overly clear in themselves, it has been intuitively possible for me to recognise the celebration of congresses and the existence of publications whose main mission or purpose is not scientific.<sup>1,2</sup> Even a person like myself without scientific training, has received several emails complaining about these pseudo-scientific congresses. This was when the issue really caught my attention and I wished to explore this phenomenon in greater depth and gain a better knowledge of what it really consisted of.

### What are they?

Basically they are congresses and publications with no scientific rigour. The published contents lack peer review, one does not really know what entity is behind them and clearly, following an initial analysis, one detects that their main motivation is financial. So, if it is common knowledge that they are in some way fake, how is it they proliferate so?

There are several reasons, but without a doubt the most important is the old chestnut, that of certain companies and collectives having a disproportionate interest in making money and which clearly have contempt for the enormous, admirable work the scientific community has been carrying out on a daily basis for many long years.

They invite researchers to attend bogus conferences or congresses, where the proposals are not reviewed at all. Whoever wishes to participate (and gain the corresponding credit) simply has to pay an average of 1,000 euros.<sup>3</sup>

Certain professionals, who are a minority, and usually those starting out in their careers, in their desire to quickly

improve their professional career, are attracted by the suggestive and seductive themes of these congresses and publications. Here should be added the promises of obtaining the publication of articles in record time or more easily than the norm. Without being totally aware of this, they contribute to this phenomenon, which then backfires on their career.

It goes without saying that it is within the interests of the entire scientific community and also the actual congress organization sector, not to contribute to this phenomenon and where possible, to report (through social networks, blocking email accounts, etc.) all the initiatives which do not respect scientific rigour or the scientific collective work so necessary for the future of our society.

### Was there anyone else missing?

In Spain we have been emerging from a recession that swallowed 3.6 million jobs (since Autumn 2008),<sup>4</sup> and which has lasted over 6 years (personally I believe we have never really totally gotten over it). Furthermore, since 2000, the mean salary rose from 19,500 to 20,600 Euros in 15 years, a rise of barely 6%.<sup>5</sup>

Healthcare professionals have seen their work rewarded with salaries which are below those that actually correspond to them (one only has to compare with those of colleagues in nearby countries to see this abnormality in black and white).<sup>6</sup> Working conditions have also worsened during recent years and are, among other things, the reason why it is increasingly more difficult to attend congresses for training and be kept up to date so as to better care for their patients.

The pharmaceutical industry, for its part, has also reduced its investment in incentives and congresses, whilst simultaneously increasing the number of its own activities which compete with congresses organized by scientific Societies.

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As if we did not have enough trouble with the sector organising congresses and meetings, a new threat has appeared in the form of predatory congresses.

And having said this, what is going to happen in upcoming years?

Nobody can predict the future and obviously neither can I, but it is absolutely true that there are already signs and clues as to where this future is leading us.

1. - Firstly, we know that the need for training by professionals has not been reduced in recent years. On the contrary, it has increased and with highly significant intensity. We are at a time where the need for research is greater, where many of the general pathologies require more specialized knowledge to be able to better embrace the challenges put forward from the point of view of care, treatment and research.<sup>7</sup>

We have observed an increase in congresses which revolve around specific themes, and which are generally associated with fewer participants, compared with more generalist themes.

The hyper connectivity of our society today, together with the speed of changes occurring, is definitely an even greater indication that we are living in an environment of continuous change and this, without a doubt, changes everything. The norm for these times, and the years to follow, is and will be a sensation of living through constant change. What was valid yesterday is past its sell-by date today and will definitely be invalid tomorrow. We would therefore do well to get used to change being the new normality. In fact, life itself is already just so. Every day is different from the previous one and will be different from the following one, but in some ways this is so much clearer now than it used to be.

Let me clarify, however, that I do not disain traditional knowledge. Quite the opposite. I consider it to be the foundation upon which the capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills is based.

2. - There are and will be elements in the realm of public administration which will help professionals to be able to attend congresses.

Certainly, we have left behind forever those years when it was possible for a professional to attend several congresses throughout the working year. Professionals will prioritise those congresses they are truly interested in attending.

Other factors such as the evolution of the population, mean salaries, and the financial climate will very possibly fail to improve in the future, and these elements will probably tend to tighten up this trend.

3. - In opposition to the above point, there is and will be a pharmaceutical industry that will continue having an interest in professionals being trained and being aware of the advantages of their products and services.

This will be reflected in several ways. On the one hand their direct or indirect contribution will continue with the celebration of congresses and on the other, the implementation of their own training activities will continue to rise.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the demands from industry for participating in congresses will be much higher and all investment where a clear and measurable return is not apparent will quite simply be rejected.

4. - Broad offers regarding training will continue but only that of true value will prevail over time. Many congresses of

questionable scientific value have fallen by the wayside in recent years and this is a reality which will continue occurring in upcoming years.

5. - The incorporation of new generations of professionals, together with current and future technologies, will foster the existence of multiple channels providing training.

Face-to-face congresses will be present and continue their presence with the addition of other forms and ways of accessing training, with virtual classrooms, webinars, etc. Thus a mixture channels will be built up to provide personalised training to each professional, in such a way that each professional may structure their training according to their own needs and interests.

Due to the above, the essential argument both for future congresses and publications should mostly be their relevance and scientific rigour. These aspects have to be the essential axis on which to construct the proposal of the congress and/or publication.

From this cornerstone, the challenges in question refer to how scientific knowledge will be provided (in what format), how congresses will be organized (replacing the traditional model) and how the needs and interests of the main actors (health and industrial professionals) will be determined.

We are, undoubtedly, facing enormous challenges and in all modesty, in our earnest desire to add our tiny grain of sand to the sector and to society, we will try to respond as best we can, in honour of our enormous admiration for the healthcare professionals. All our best endeavours will go towards this.

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