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The Globe Trotters

It is clear enough to most of us that we have gone from famine to feast in attempts to educate and "cross-fertilize" the medical and scientific public. Time was when an international congress was a big event, to be looked forward to as the money was saved for it, and not to be missed at any price. Contrast this with what is going on today. Wolstenholme [*Science* 145, 1337 (1964)] calls it "obese degeneration of scientific congresses," indicating rigidity of national societies, haphazard expansion of regional meetings, and the cynical extravagance of huge congresses from which both science and friendship are squeezed out. The time has certainly come to reexamine our motives and our needs when we talk of communication on an international level.

Obviously, most international congresses have become so large that the objective of exchanging scientific information has been lost. Who could have any worthwhile idea of what goes on when 20 or more papers of 10 minutes each are being read concurrently, day in and day out, especially when the translators are both overworked and often ineffective? The social gatherings, where one might have a chance to meet new friends, have lost the quality that makes people reach out to one another.

Since the big meetings are satisfying neither the educational nor the social needs of the participants, I suggest it is time we do some experimenting. First, small international clubs could be formed, or dissolved, according to the particular needs of various special groups. The important thing is that they be kept small, so that science rather than politics reigns. Whether these clubs should be on a regional basis or worldwide may be left to the discretion of the participants, but their meetings should be correlated and announced by some central worldwide agency.

Second, symposia could be arranged as the need arose, in which the speakers would be invited and the audience would be free to come or not as it liked. The content of the program could reflect specialized knowledge or, even better, interdisciplinary instruction. Such meetings would have far greater pedagogic value than the more usual symposium, with its 10-minute talks by speakers both good and bad. Meetings of this sort would draw relatively small audiences because of their specialized or interdisciplinary nature and their wide geographical representation.

Third, the enormous meetings currently in vogue might be greatly improved by having selected speakers in the morning sessions present their own work when it had matured to the point of having broad significance. In contrast to the morning sessions, the afternoons could be used for individual discussion of submitted abstracts covering much more specific and limited topics, and instead of sitting in a noisy lecture room, with people coming and going, the participants might meet in the speaker's own hotel room. A daily bulletin would indicate where he could be found. Wouldn't it be nice to know that your friend Joe could be consulted in room X of hotel Z between 2:00 and 5:00 p.m., instead of only at the cocktail hour? Wouldn't it be good to meet face to face with the investigator and discuss mutual interests? This arrangement would satisfy the needs of both science and friendship, the two sought-after ingredients of a congress.

Surely there are international secretariats willing to organize new ways of conducting meetings. Equally surely, many of us would understand if a particular experiment failed. And we would welcome the opportunity to applaud if it would get all of us out of the formalistic and generally arid international Brownian movement.

—IRVINE H. PAGE, *Research Division, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio*