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Platinum Opinion

Traditional and Virtual Congress Meetings During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Post-COVID-19 Era: Is it Time to Change the Paradigm?

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At this critical time when the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading, major congress meetings have either been cancelled or delayed, including urology meetings. The 2020 annual meeting of the European Association of Urology due to be held in July has been postponed. The annual meeting of the American Urological Association has also been cancelled and will be replaced by a virtual education symposium. Similarly, many other events at national and regional levels have been cancelled. Such drastic decisions were mandatory considering that the peak of the COVID-19 spread has not yet been reached, and that differences in epidemic curves among countries make global organization difficult. Urologists worldwide are also being asked to reorganize their clinical activity to support internists and anesthesiologists [1–3]. Moreover, giving the

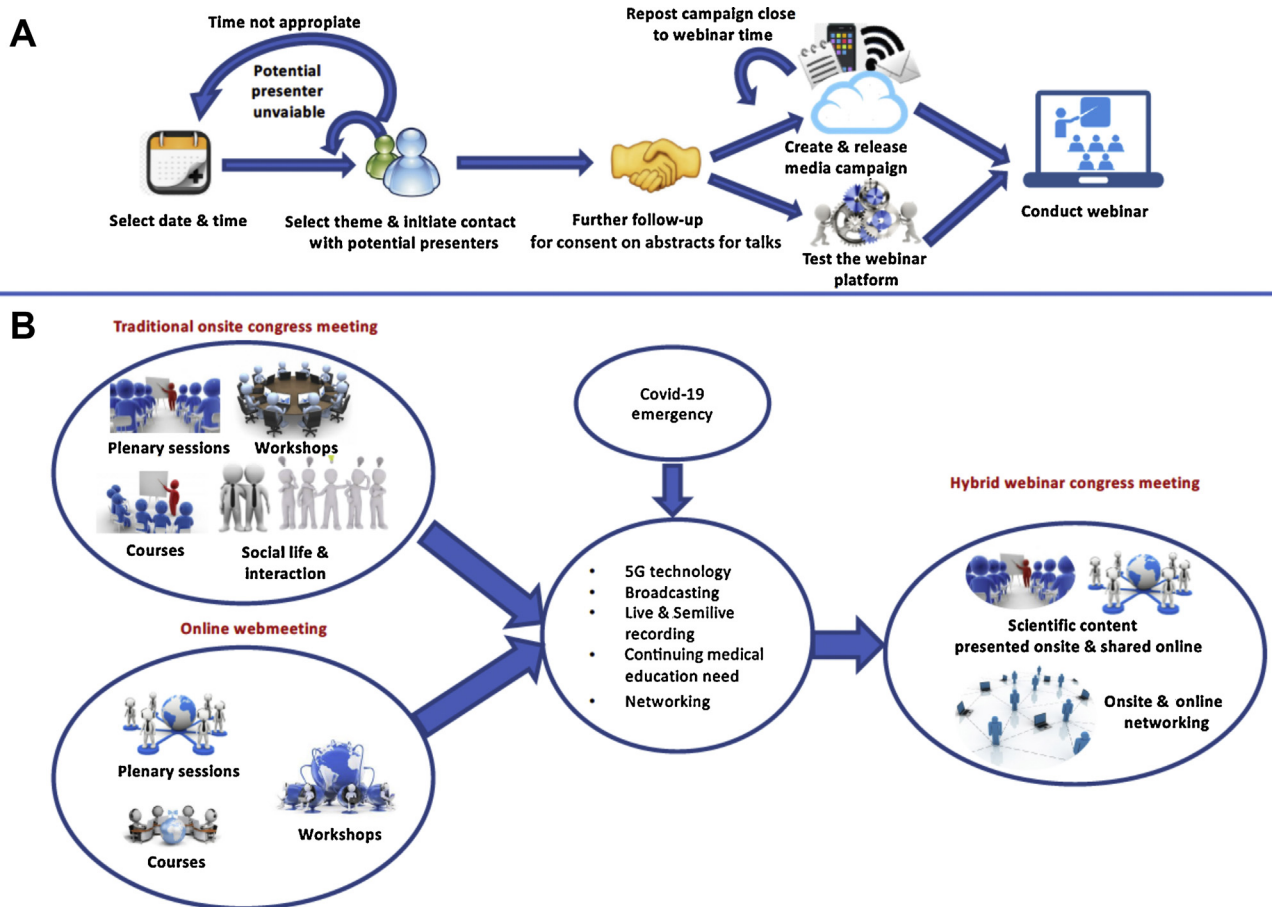
high virulence of COVID-19, gathering thousands of attendees in a single venue would be inappropriate [4,5].

Despite the inevitability of these decisions, they have significant consequences: (1) continuing medical education has been disrupted; and (2) the economic damage to scientific societies and industry partners appears to be huge. In trying to solve these issues and overcome the well-established format for traditional meeting, the possibility of organizing a virtual congress using online technology seems to be attractive and safe. The new digital platforms now available allow advanced virtual integration among users, giving opportunities for exchange of remote information. Interactive video and audio capabilities allow real-time interaction. The advent of hyperefficient telecommunication networks (satellite, 5 G) guarantees the transmission of high-quality images offering an optimal visual experience, with an image quality close to reality [6]. Moreover, these technologies allow the creation of virtual communities in which “social-virtual” events, at which participants meet to discuss a common topic, can be organized. The most modern tool for live distance learning is webinar technology [7] (Fig. 1A). Attendees can potentially deliver the same scientific contribution as at a live event without the need to move from their workplace; industries can also add commercial spots during online meetings. A completely web-based event can be planned.

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Q1 Fig. 1 – (A) Flowchart of planning and logistics activities for a webinar series. Adapted from Fadlelmola et al [7]. (B) Graphical representation of content for a traditional onsite congress and an online web-meeting. Owing to the advent of new technologies and pushed by the COVID-19 emergency, a hybrid webinar congress can be planned.

64 Although this technological solution has much appeal, it
 65 also has some critical limitations. Human contact, affec-
 66 tions, and emotions are almost impossible to reproduce on
 67 an online platform. Many formal and most informal
 68 interactions among faculty, delegates, scientific societies,
 69 and industries could be at risk, potentially reducing the
 70 opportunities for networking. Moreover, the role of
 71 the scientific societies themselves could also be jeopard-
 72 ized, considering the economic implications of such
 73 reorganization.

74 Ideally, a union between people and technology should
 75 be created. All the unlimited potential of the digital world
 76 should be gradually integrated into the real world, leading
 77 to a “hybrid” event. A real *agora* should be merged with a
 78 virtual *agora*, whereby meeting attendees enjoy the virtual
 79 content provided and interact with it in real time (Fig. 1B).
 80 Preliminary experiences using social media (Twitter) during
 81 which meeting content was shared and debated between
 82 onsite and online attendees have already been reported
 83 [8]. In the near future, scientific sessions could be a mix
 84 between live and broadcasted events during which the
 85 onsite faculty interact dynamically with online members.
 86 All the scientific content of the meeting should be
 87 transmitted online via real-time or delayed streaming to

allow attendees to choose the best time at which to view the
 sessions. Some meetings already stream plenary session
 lectures and selected smaller lectures, but this capability
 could be expanded across the full meeting content. Dedicated
 online platforms and apps for meeting exist but could be
 greatly improved in terms of the interface and capability to
 allow delegates to choose their preferred sessions and
 explore exhibition areas. Poster “walks” could be conducted
 virtually, and open Q&A sessions for poster presenters
 could continue asynchronously throughout the duration of
 the meeting (and beyond). For onsite attendees, the social
 experience should be maximized. Scientific sessions should
 be accompanied by social events aimed to facilitate onsite
 networking, which remains a highly valuable experience for
 members of the community to build both personal and
 scientific relationships.

The speed and reach of the COVID-19 pandemic have
 forced rapid changes in how we conduct all aspects of
 medical practice and research. Some of these—wider and
 less burdensome implementation of telehealth solutions,
 for example—have been a long time coming and hopefully
 will persist as a durable silver lining when the crisis
 subsides. The similarly rapid evolution in how scientific
 meetings are conducted should likewise have long-term

112 benefits. We hope that by the end of the COVID-19
113 emergency, we will enjoy a new reality in which technology
114 and sociality go together in order to offer a more engaging
115 and adaptable scientific congress experience, allowing more
116 flexible and dynamic use of content, modulated to the needs
117 of each attendee.

118 **Q3 Conflicts of interest:** The authors have nothing to disclose.

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