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FEATURES SECTION

Chairing a scientific session

Julian O'Neill, BDS, MSc, FFD, M. Orth and RCS
Kettering General Hospital, Rothwell Road, Kettering, Northamptonshire, NN16 8UZ, UK

Jonathan Sandler, BDS, MSc, FDS, M. Orth and RCS
Chesterfield Royal Hospital, Calow, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S44 5BL, UK

Introduction

Many of us will be asked from time to time during our career, to chair a scientific session at a meeting, symposium or conference. This short article is designed as an aid for those who have agreed to perform this task. It is based on experiences as session Chairmen, both good and bad, and of attending many previous local, national and international meetings where the quality of chairmanship varied enormously.

Role of the Chairman

The core duties of the chairman in charge of a session at any meeting often include:

1. to open the session promptly;
2. to explain any housekeeping rules as well as the rules of engagement;
3. to introduce the speakers to the assembled audience;
4. to ensure the presentations run to time;
5. to manage the question and answer session where appropriate;
6. to close the session on time.

Preparation

Before the meeting

It is almost impossible to over prepare both as a speaker and as a session chairman. It is always essential to read the speakers' CVs to provide all the necessary background information in order to construct accurate and concise introduction notes.

Ideally, the chairman should contact the speakers individually by telephone or email in the weeks running up to the meeting. This will not only allow the chairman to introduce him or herself to the speaker but can also allow collection of further information or verify the information already received from the speaker, which can then be used in the introduction. Often, speakers use older versions of their 'abbreviated CVs' if they have many invitations to speak and it is always better to check that the details provided are current. If the speaker is unfamiliar to you it is also very helpful to ask them to attach a JPEG photograph of themselves to avoid any embarrassing mistakes.

It is also helpful to the speaker to offer oneself as a point of contact, especially if they are attending from another specialty or country in which case they may not know anybody at the meeting. It is important to check they understand the specific AV requirements. Some speakers for example, where possible, prefer to use their own data projector, which needs to be set up and thoroughly tested in advance. Many meetings organizers send out specific and explicit AV requirements forms well in advance, but this is not always the case; or indeed the form may not have been read by the presenter!

Most presentations these days will be on PowerPoint. Check if this has been created on a Mac or IBM computer. If a Mac has been used, compatible AV facilities should have been made available. However this is not always the case. Encourage the presenter to visit the AV centre in good time and certainly more than a couple of hours before their presentation so that any 'teething problems' can be ironed out before the performance. The use of personal laptops at the time of presentation is discouraged at some conferences, although many presenters feel that they will have lost their security blanket! Speakers should be strongly encouraged to have a back up of their presentation on CD/DVD or USB stick and to load that backup version to the 'main computer system' even if they intend to use their own laptop as, occasionally, laptop failures occur. We all know that most speakers like to nip and tweak presentations in the early hours of the morning of their talk. Again this should be discouraged where possible unless they are prepared to test the reconfigured slideshow on 'the system' to ensure it runs satisfactorily.

Address for correspondence: Julian O'Neill, Kettering General Hospital, Rothwell Road, Kettering, Northamptonshire, NN16 8UZ, UK.
Email: julizone@yahoo.co.uk

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Finally, it is courteous to ask the speaker if they need any help or advice with travel arrangements to or from airports and stations. Always check that your speakers are checked in to the conference or hotel well before their presentation. It is extremely embarrassing for a session Chairman, in front of a crowd of 500 or so delegates just making themselves comfortable, to be the last person to know that their presenter for the whole morning session is 1000 miles away in his private office!

If there is a social event the evening before your session try to ensure that neither you nor your speakers are the last ones to leave the bar!

On the day

First thing, it is worth contacting the conference chairman or social programme organizer to check if there have been any changes to the planned programme. There may be some housekeeping arrangements or other useful information for delegates regarding meeting points and times for evening functions which need to be passed at the beginning of the session. If gifts or honoraria are to be presented after each talk, these should be collected from the appropriate person and stored under the Chairman's table.

Try to contact the speakers at breakfast time to ensure that they have everything that they need. They may be nervous, and a friendly face will almost certainly help them to relax at least for a few minutes.

Check with the AV technician that all of the presentations are loaded to the main system and they are labelled correctly and in the correct order. If the speakers are using their own laptops, ensure they have a power supply and that all the systems are working correctly. Ensure that the microphones are working properly and that there are roving microphones available for questions where necessary. .

Check that you have your legible introductory notes, reading glasses (if over a certain age!), pen for taking notes and a functioning watch or other timer. Encourage the speakers to familiarize themselves with the podium, the stage layout, the AV controls and any laser pointer that is available. Explain the lighting system if one is to be used, and once again explain to the speaker how long his talk will be and the system you will use to bring his talk to a close if he overruns his allotted time.

Ensure that there is water and a glass available for each speaker although it is always worth placing this on a separate table in order to avoid the disastrous if highly entertaining spectacle of water interacting with the conference laptop!

Dress code

For most UK audiences it is conventional for the session chairmen to dress smartly as a mark of respect both for the speakers and the audience. A guide would to be dress as if you were the speaker.

Opening the session

Remind delegates to take their seats quickly and quietly about two or three minutes ahead of the time your session is to begin. This is also the time to remind delegates regarding any housekeeping updates as there will be less audience attention at the end of the session.

The introduction for the speaker should try to grab the attention of the audience and may include a line such as 'This promises to be a very exciting morning, introducing some in the audience to the field of craniosacral orthodontic homeopathic therapy and some of its more interesting claims'. This will set the scene and raises the expectations of the audience.

Before introducing the speaker explain the 'rules of engagement for questions' whether they will be taken after each talk or whether to wait for a panel discussion towards the end of the session. Insist nobody speaks without a microphone (unless it is a small venue) and once again insist all mobile phones are turned to silent or vibrate.

Introducing the speakers

In preliminary discussions, speakers can be asked how they would like to be introduced. Some prefer a very short introduction, particularly if they are well known to the audience. Do not say this speaker needs no introduction and then spend five minutes introducing them. International speakers, or those from another specialty, who are less well known to the audience should have a longer, more formal introduction to establish their credibility to speak on the topic of their choice.

The introduction is a courtesy. Avoid the experience of one of the authors who was once introduced by the words: 'I've never heard of him myself, but he's here to talk about twin blocks'. The introduction is important in setting the scene and, on occasions, settling the speaker down. It also allows them time to adjust the microphone and size up the audience.

During the presentation

In the UK it is customary for the chairman to move down from the stage into the front row of the auditorium during the presentation and remain there until about five minutes before the talk is due to finish. This also provides a visual cue to the speaker that it is time to start winding things up.

Keeping the session to time

This is probably the most critical role for the chairman and without doubt the hardest to achieve. Over running is discourteous to all spent a great deal of time preparing their talks. It is also extremely rude to the session Chairman and to the audience as it reduces valuable question time and makes delegates late for subsequent commitments. It is always awkward to stop a speaker in their tracks, particularly if they are well-respected member of the profession and have often travelled a long way! Often a 'traffic light' system is available to be activated by the chairman. This provides speakers with visual cues alerting them to the amount of time remaining for their talk. The amber light is a warning to the speaker to 'start winding up now' and can be activated at an agreed time before the end of the talk. The red light means stop at the end of the next sentence. Flashing red means you are about to be cut off.

The chairman should point out the lighting system to speakers at the beginning of the session and it should be stressed that they will stick to it. The lights are sometimes ignored often by speakers of Mediterranean temperament.

If so, or if they are not available, the chairman should choose a point where the speaker has paused and stand up and state clearly, explicitly and loudly 'one minute left'.

This is enough of a clue for all but the pathologically verbose. If a speaker does continue beyond this, the chairman needs to cut in and say: 'Thank you for your stimulating presentation, but we must finish now as I'm sure there are many questions that the audience would like to ask' and start the applause. This will bring all but the most self-obsessed speakers to a halt. For the others there is no alternative but firmly to take their arm and escort them off the stage!

Managing questions

The chairman, together with input from the Conference Chairman and the speakers need to decide, at the beginning of the session, how much time to devote to questions and whether, if there is more than one speaker, questions should be taken together and answered in a panel discussion. This format is most suitable if the speakers have been presenting related topics.

This needs to be agreed with the speakers before the session starts.

Delegates are often reluctant to open with the first question and a good chairman should have noted one or two points during the talk which can provide him or her with a ready made starter question while the audience gathers collective thoughts and courage. The first question can be specific after which the chairman asks the audience to pose questions. If again none are forthcoming try to make your second question an 'open question' such as 'In view of what you have said and the findings of your research could you please share your thoughts on …' This will give an experienced speaker the opportunity to fill the allotted question time appropriately.

Closing the session

This customarily involves thanking the speaker(s) on behalf of the organizing society and the audience. It may also involve the presentation of gifts, honoraria or certificates. Photographs may also be taken at the end of each speech or session and these often include the session chairman.

Following the applause for the speaker it is timely to remind delegates about the prompt start of the next session, and the excitements which are on offer!

In conclusion

A well-prepared chairman is the determining factor in the smooth running of any scientific meeting. This should result in happy speakers and satisfied delegates who will be keen to return next year!