

The Annual Meeting: From Conception to Birth

The ASHG Annual Meeting is a principal activity of the Society and drives the calendar for the organization and the staff. The planning for each meeting actually starts nearly a decade in advance, with the location of the meeting currently decided by the Board of Directors through 2013 (that one will be in Boston, by the way). The scientific content and specific agenda of each meeting is determined by the Program Committee (PC), with major changes, enhancements, and fiscal matters subject to approval by the Executive Committee or the Board.

Calendar

To explain the development of meeting content and to emphasize the importance of member input, the calendar of activities of the PC for an annual meeting cycle is summarized below.

October

While the annual meeting is in full swing, the PC meets twice at the convention center to start discussing Invited Scientific Sessions and specific areas of focus for the next year's meeting. At this juncture, a general theme or focus of the meeting may be determined. During the conference, the members of the PC are also evaluating the meeting itself, and they always welcome timely feedback from any attendees. The immediate debriefing session occurs on the last day of the meeting.

November/December

The PC meets via conference calls, evaluating each proposal for an Invited Scientific Session and discussing content and suggested speakers. The committee members follow up individually with the proposers of the sessions, by phone and/or e-mail, and may make suggestions or requests on the basis of committee discussions. Since the proposals vary in their presentation of detail and content, some submissions may be requested to be merged with other similar or overlapping proposals. The number of proposals has been between 35 and 80, of which 14 or 21 sessions will be selected, depending on the program format. In the event that an important current topic has not been covered in any submission, an additional call for proposals may be issued in November.

During this period, the Information and Education Committee and the Social Issues Committee have also called for proposals for the Education and Social Issues sessions presented the first morning of the meeting. The PC may have received proposals that would be more appropriate for these other sessions, and the PC forwards those submissions accordingly. Suggestions may be made to slightly adjust the focus of a submission to achieve better balance in the overall program.

January

The committees make their final decisions regarding invited sessions, the notifications and invitations are sent, and the staff work begins to obtain final confirmation of speakers and written de-

scriptions (150 words) of the session content for the meeting publications, both printed and electronic.

February

As February rolls around, the PC Chair completes a major responsibility of his or her appointment by suggesting the topic and speakers for the Distinguished Speaker Symposium. With the concurrence of fellow committee members and the Executive Committee, the Chair extends invitations for the anchor session of the meeting.

At this point in the calendar, the President extends invitations to those selected to present at the Special Symposium on the evening before the close of the conference. This relatively new event is an opportunity to reach beyond our own community to provide engaging presentations that highlight timely issues and perspectives important for our membership to appreciate.

March/April

At the spring meeting of the Board of Directors, a progress report is made by the PC Chair and staff, providing an update on scientific content and logistics. By April, any special workshops, such as the Publications or Mock Study Section workshop, are also organized. Additional events, such as the Job Fair and the Trainee Session, are also finalized.

In preparation for the review of submitted abstracts for contributed papers sessions, PC members have identified the additional reviewers for abstracts (two per topic), so that every abstract can be reviewed by three peer scientists with expertise in the appropriate area of human genetics.

May

The Awards Committee selects the winners of the William Allan, Curt Stern, Excellence in Education, and Leadership awards from among those nominated during the previous few months. These selections will provide the content for sessions in which the awards are presented.

For the remainder of the annual meeting cycle, the focus is on the contributed papers (presentations) selected from among the submitted abstracts to meet the deadline sometime in June. We have been receiving between 2,000 and 3,000 abstracts per year (2,423 for 2006), so the selection process must be comprehensive in scope.

June

All abstracts are entered directly into a database upon submission, and, by the end of June, the review process begins. Although this is a large undertaking, reviewers have the opportunity to see the most exciting emerging science in abstract form. The category selected by the author is confirmed, and then each abstract is sent to the committee member responsible for that category and to two additional reviewers that member has selected. Each ab-

abstract is reviewed and scored on an NIH-style scale of 1–7. Abstracts in each category are ranked by score, and the scores are provided to the PC member responsible for the topic. The highest-scoring abstracts are suggested by the committee for consideration for plenary session presentation.

July

The entire PC meets in July at the ASHG office in Bethesda and selects the abstracts to be presented in the plenary session. Each PC member has also arranged abstracts into proposed platform sessions of 10, using score and content as guides. At the July meeting, the platform sessions are determined by the committee, and moderators for those sessions are confirmed. Sessions are named and room assignments planned, with lively discussion regarding the best arrangement of the concurrent sessions. The poster grouping topics are confirmed at this time. The final program is set, the final schedule is arranged and confirmed, and then the authors are informed of their assignments.

Member Responsibilities and Contributions

The PC has the overall responsibility of determining the selection and arrangement of the Annual Meeting's content. However, the scientific quality of every meeting depends on the submission of proposals for invited sessions, as well as the abstracts process. If an area of interest is not included in the program in any year, it may simply be the result of lack of submissions in a given area.

Not every proposal can be included, but the committee is committed to seeking balance and quality of content every year. The calls for proposals and abstracts are serious requests for input to both the invited and contributed papers sessions.

We encourage all members to become involved in enhancing the quality of the ASHG Annual Meeting by submitting abstracts or proposing invited sessions. If you are interested in being considered for appointment to the PC or another committee, please let us know.

This year's theme, appropriate for the host city of New Orleans, is "Regeneration." The PC has assembled an extremely robust program selected from 2,400 abstracts, with new platform sessions devoted to cardiovascular genetics, psychiatric genetics, and neurogenetics. A state-of-the-art symposium on stem cells highlights the theme of renewal and complements a Distinguished Speaker Symposium featuring Nobel Prize winner Peter Agre, gene therapy expert Alain Fischer, and glycobiologist Ajit Varki.

Special Recognition

At this time, we give special thanks to the PC members for 2006, for their commitment and investment of time and energy, and to Bill Gahl, PC Chair, for his energy, dedication, and leadership of this year's process.

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