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I watched a program on regional television whilst visiting my parents for a few days in semi-rural Lincolnshire following the Manchester virtual conference. The program was providing highlights of the Great Yorkshire Show, which was running at a reduced capacity due to coronavirus guidelines. It included an in-depth interview with a sheep farmer, who spent days on end alone during lockdown tending his farm on a very tight budget. It showed how much bringing his prize sheep to market meant to him, with obligatory footage of the sheep being walked around the ring parading a rosette. We remarked that for many of the farming community the agricultural show is the highlight of the year, it is where real business gets done, and for some it is one of the few times they even get to socialise given the demands of the profession.

This naturally led to some soul searching and socially distanced discussion in our registrar's office at the John Radcliffe Hospital. Are medical conferences basically the same as agricultural shows? Large conferences have multiple events going on at the same time, participants bring posters and presentations of the work they have been undertaking over the past months and years (some of which win prizes), the best people give presentations to improve our practice, people from industry interact and try to show you super new bits of kit that you want but can't really afford. Pretty similar so far!

However, we all felt that the social interaction from missing in person really was missing. This included social (seeing people from other hospitals you haven't seen in ages), networking (come and look at my poster: you are interested in T cells / multiplex immunohistochemistry / rare tumours / interstitial lung disease / post-mortems aren't you, what could we work on in future....), career advice (when I was a registrar....), just being able to stand up on a stage, present your work and have a natter over tea and biscuits afterwards (and probably gently inflate the ego as well...). The inescapable conclusion is that conferences (and the psychology of the attendees) have more overlap with agricultural shows than we probably dare admit!

Last year was the first educational meeting I have attended remotely due to COVID (the Gloucester GI Pathology Course) and this went surprisingly well, as did the recent St Georges Cardiac Pathology course. It seems that courses are a lot easier to attend remotely and retain their educational quality, though meeting and getting to know the people you will be sending funny looking polyps / heart tissue with possible cardiomyopathy for specialist opinion always helps. Similarly, areas of the Manchester conference with a strong educational content worked very well, going over the teaching cases was particularly enjoyable. Being able to put your feet up at home during a plenary lecture is highly recommended: I think these sessions are primarily to inspire (ever seen a YouTube TED talk?), so online plenary lectures transfer well.

Being able to pre-record my talk was advantageous: no worries of making egregious mistakes or running out of time! However, it did feel strange to mentally switch off whilst my past-self did all the work, only to have to re-engage to answer a question from cold at home. I also had no idea of how many people watched the talk (and whether they were nodding off to sleep or were engrossed: who knows?).

Being at work for some of the conference was disruptive: there is a great temptation to do other tasks whilst attending an online conference and I suspect most attendees were less attentive than would otherwise be expected. I think the impact of conference "take home" is greatly diminished by this divided attention. I feel that attending a conference in person provides a captive audience time to fully listen to other people's work, triumphs, disasters, and hard learned lessons. It is easy to forget that the work we do benefits other people's lives tremendously: human interactions with your peers provides a real 'esprit de corps' that inspires and motivates us to do better despite increasingly adverse professional environments. I think a virtual platform does diminish this part of professional development considerably. However, it was an excellent effort by the organising team to get the conference up and running in difficult circumstances, and I am very grateful for the bursary to allow attendance. Hopefully we can meet in person in future: how about outdoors, exit junction 46 A1M at Wetherby? I will bring my wellies and a sunhat, with a promise to leave the sheep at home!