

Editorial



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CONFERENCE CONNECTIONS

In many countries conferences are a regular feature of the professional lives of critical care nurses. The number of conferences at both national and international level appears to have grown over the last few years, presenting critical care nurses with a plethora of opportunities. For many nurses the national conference in their home country has become an annual pilgrimage – but the real question is – what is the value of a conference? In our view, its value is measured in terms of its ability to impact on nursing practice. If it does not affect the care of patients, then arguably it is just another form of entertainment.

The question of value is an important one, particularly for nurse managers and budget holders who may be asked to fund conference attendance of staff. Research conducted in Canada several years ago indicated that nurses with more than 10 years' experience attend more conferences than novice nurses (Ofusu, 1997). Assuming that many staff will be funded by their managers in terms of study leave to attend, the costs are more than just the registration and accommodation fees. Like any other educational event, managers will be asking themselves questions like: how will this particular conference contribute to the knowledge and skills of my staff; and what are the benefits for patients and the service?

Conferences enable nurses to increase their understanding of critical care practice, research, education and management. They provide an important forum for the introduction of new ideas and allow colleagues to share practice developments. Undoubtedly, attending a conference provides time to participate in educational activities. But is it effective in achieving its aims? Typically, conference advertising claims suggest that delegates will be exposed to 'cutting edge' research, best practice, views and opinions, engage in dialogue with experts in the field, and present opportunities for networking with colleagues.

But does all this conference activity really translate into changes in nursing practice? Interestingly, despite the growth of conferencing, there has been little research in this area. The idea that we might engage in a costly educational activity (such as a conference) without evaluating its impact on our practice is, if you think about it, inexcusable in today's world of outcome measurement and evaluation. Its quite inconceivable that we would implement an intervention in practice without evaluating its effect in terms of outcomes, so why should we expect to attend a conference without evaluating how it has impacted on our practice?

This raises a real challenge for us: how can we demonstrate the worth of a conference in a way that is understood by both managers and practitioners?

Attending a conference can be a costly business therefore a budget holder needs to consider the value of allowing a staff member to attend. Managers increasingly demand some form of output from conference attendance, for example feedback sessions to other staff or indeed the presentation of a poster or free paper at the event to showcase a particular unit or department.

Networking with other critical care nurses is invaluable but it is difficult to provide budget holders with tangible evidence of value for money. However, making contact with key individuals can offer advantages to both the individual and place of work. An American networking coach described networking as "a reciprocal process that is mutually beneficial, where we share leads, ideas and information, and it enhances our personal and professional lives and involves follow-up behaviours that create ongoing connections" (RoAne, 1993). Networking is a two way process; instead of searching for resources, build partnerships. RoAne suggests several tips with regard to networking, but one of the most important ones to bear in mind is: after the event . . . keep the partnership alive. In this way, what started out as an interesting discussion can lead to collaborative approaches than can in turn lead to improvements in practice.

So, make the most of conference opportunities – there are plenty available – just hit the CONNECTIONS/CONFERENCE CONNECTIONS button on this web site for example. And, when you are asking your managers to support your attendance ask yourself questions like, how can this conference make a difference to my practice? Then make a case to your manager that articulates its value in practice outcomes.



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