

RESEARCH ADVOCACY: Attending Scientific Conferences

This PIP Digest provides an overview of the value of scientific conferences for patient advocates as well as practical tips for getting the most out of attending a scientific conference.

Key Concepts

- Value of scientific conferences
- Practical tips
- Overview of a scientific poster

Related PIP Digests

- Research Studies – Understanding Research Articles
- Research Studies – Statistics 101
- Research Studies – More Statistics

Why attend a scientific conference?

A scientific conference is an event for researchers and is an important way that researchers can connect with other researchers, promote new developments in their work, and get feedback from their peers. New research collaborations can even be formed! For trainees, conferences provide great opportunities to meet prospective supervisors or employers, meet other trainees in their field, gain experience in presenting their work, and get information about further research funding opportunities. **For patients**, scientific conferences are a quick way to appreciate the breadth of research being undertaken and get a pulse on the latest research developments. Conferences also provide opportunities to connect one-on-one with researchers, ask questions, and highlight the value of lived experience to the larger research community. They may even facilitate your involvement in a research project.

The presence of patients at scientific conferences is not new, but there has been a cultural shift in recognizing the vital contribution that patients can bring to these forums of scientific discourse. “Nothing About Us Without Us” is the motto of Disabled Peoples International. The organization was created in 1981 in response to the Rehabilitation International Conference held in Winnipeg where, out of 5000+ conference delegates, only 200 people with disabilities were permitted.

This motto has been adopted very broadly to endorse patient participation in scientific and healthcare conferences that goes beyond mere attendance. That is, **meaningful participation** means that patients are involved in the conference

program design, are on the speaker and/or session chair rosters and are provided with opportunities for education and mentorship so that they can become even more informed patient research advocates.¹

Since its initial conference in 2011, the CCRA has worked to increase its engagement of patients in the Canadian Cancer Research Conference (CCRC). The Patient Involvement in Cancer Research Program (PIP) is one way that the CCRA provides opportunities for patients to expand their knowledge and skills so that they feel better equipped to contribute to the conference itself and the wider Canadian cancer research enterprise.

Practical Tips

While scientific conferences range in size, many are very large. All the people and the large venue sizes can be a bit overwhelming, but...just like any new experience, you will find your stride!

Preparing for the Conference

- Wear comfortable shoes. Most conferences are held in large venues and lots of walking is required to go from session to session (although some physical activity will be welcomed after many hours of sitting!).
- Pack appropriate clothing. Business casual is the commonly accepted attire. It is advisable to bring along a light jacket or sweater that can be easily put on or removed as temperatures may vary from room to room within the conference venue.
- Review the conference program to select which concurrent sessions you will want to attend – knowing your schedule ahead of time will make the day go smoother. Many conferences have moved to mobile event apps to help delegates easily access information about the conference sessions and the presenters.
- Peruse the other online resources within the PIP Digest series. These will help acquaint you with terms and information that may be covered during the sessions.
- Scan the poster abstracts and identify those that are most relevant to you (more advice follows in the “What is a Scientific Poster?” section).
- Bring your notetaking supplies – pens/pencils and a notepad or an electronic device.

During the Conference

- Where possible, get to know other delegates and presenters. Networking is the most important part of conference attendance and may even result in opportunities to become engaged in research projects!
- Ask questions of presenters. This can be intimidating for non-scientists—even scientists themselves may be reluctant to ask questions if the presenter is an expert in a different field. The immediate relevance of the research to patients may not be evident in some presentations and this is where your questions can add value. Taking notes can also help in formulating questions or tracking important ideas that you may want to follow-up on afterwards.
- Pace yourself. Scientific conferences often involve long days, so it is important to ensure that you are well hydrated and energized to attend the sessions that are most important to you.

¹Chu, LF et al. (2016). “Nothing about us without us”—patient partnership in medical conferences. *BMJ*, 354:i3883 doi: 10.1136/bmj.i3883

- If meals are provided, ensure that you arrive at the designated times so that you have adequate time to re-fuel and re-hydrate. Meal times and breaks also great times to network. If meals are not provided at the conference, come armed with snacks that will carry you through the day.
- Express your thoughts and observations on social media by using the conference hashtag. Conference organizers pay attention to real-time posts and this can also spark responses from other participants.
- Remember...a conference is truly a departure from your day-to-day activities. It is a great opportunity to learn, meet new people, and have fun!

After the Conference

- Share the information that you have learned with others in your immediate circle and within your broader social and advocacy networks.
- Stay in touch with the delegates that you have networked with for ideas, assistance and support.
- Participate in post-meeting evaluations, where available. Only with your feedback can conference organizers improve future events.

What is a scientific poster?

Posters are a critical feature of scientific conferences. They allow researchers, especially trainees and scientists in the early stages of their careers, to communicate their research findings in a concise way and generate excitement about their work. For non-scientists, they are a great vehicle to find out about cutting-edge science. Some conferences provide opportunities for patients to contribute their posters – this can help to elevate the unique contributions that patients can make to the research process.

Often the poster sessions can be quite overwhelming – the room is often large and action-packed with posters and people. Where possible, review the poster abstracts in advance and construct a list of posters that you want to review. Set an upper limit on the number that you want to visit – say two for every half-hour of the time allocated to the poster session. This will give you ample time to review each poster and speak to the presenters. It also provides a buffer for posters that may catch your eye as you walk through the venue.

Most posters share common elements, which often closely mirror the organization and content of scientific journal articles. The diagram on the next page shows a typical poster layout.

Although dissecting a scientific poster is a valuable skill, the best way to learn about the research described in a poster is to interact with the researcher. This is particularly useful for the results section, where the data can be complex and difficult to interpret. Poster presenters are expecting your questions!

Your interactions with researchers during the poster sessions can be an insightful and rewarding part of a scientific conference and these interactions will also remind researchers about the importance of the patient perspective.

LOGO	POSTER TITLE	LOGO
	Researchers & Affiliations	
ABSTRACT	RESULTS	CONCLUSION
BACKGROUND		REFERENCES
METHODS		ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I worked in the most basic research you can work in. At that level, you're looking at molecules, not people, and you're trying to fix molecules. Meeting those [patient] advocates, it changes your intensity level, it changes your pace of research. You're just not looking at molecules and trying to fix the molecule, you're looking at people and you're saying, 'If I can fix this molecule, I can do something for this person who is standing right in front of me.' That's a game changer in terms of what it does to your patient, how hard you work."²

-- Sudip Parikh, structural biologist & CEO of American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

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²From <https://www.pcma.org/the-virtue-of-patients/#gsc.tab=0>