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### 2021: Will It Be the Best Season for International Spine Meetings Ever?

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## 2021: Will It Be the Best Season for International Spine Meetings Ever?

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The COVID pandemic can truly be seen as a marker into a different era. Almost no aspect of private and professional life stays unaltered. And while different countries and regions are going through comparable stages of the pandemic at different times, all are struggling with similar problems. Spine surgeons around the globe share the experience that shutting down outpatient clinics, altering treatment protocols for inpatient spine care, and triaging their surgery cases often present considerable challenges.

From the very beginning of the COVID outbreak, medical meetings were in jeopardy. At the time of writing this editorial, meeting season is coming to a summer break. Spine meetings in the early stages of the pandemic had to be cancelled altogether. Especially those that have a worldwide reach and participants were running out of time for preparation of a proper alternative. AOSpine's Global Spine Congress to be held in Rio de Janeiro is certainly the most prominent example here. Changing number of COVID cases and governmental, institutional, and logistical travel restrictions made it impossible to hold events of this scale with live and in-person attendance in a safe and successful way. Additionally, numerous restrictions and personal distancing rules would have changed the experience significantly.

So with large-scale in-person meetings mostly out of the question at this time, the number of online webinars skyrocket. Virtually every organization dedicated to spine care around the world has used this opportunity to reach an audience—sometimes with varying success. The global network of spine care professionals has been extremely active and showed remarkable presence. While some of the early webinars focused on sharing experience during the pandemic and pragmatic problem solving around the world, the focus has subsequently changed to non-virus-related topics of spinal education. Expert panel discussions, lectures, and interactive formats with participants provide a lively educational experience.

But what about the large international spine meetings? The fall meeting schedule is usually packed with meeting dates. At the time of writing, most organizers have decided to go online-only. Sign-up fees guarantee access to live presentations, pre-recorded presentations, and Q&A interaction with presenters, authors, and moderators just like at any regular congress. Some meetings are mirroring their content twice a day to cater for different time zones and increase visibility and impact.

Precourse meetings and other peripheral program seminars are held in a similar fashion. Suddenly, scientific programs evolve because logistical limitations are no longer a factor with room sizes out of the equation; niche topics might find a forum as well. e-Posters can be presented in the usual fashion with direct interaction with the authors at specified times.

All of these aspects have a good chance to stay beyond 2020 because they improve the scientific education part of the meetings and solve some of the logistical issues at the same time.

Interaction with industry on a vast exhibition area, usually the place for showcasing implants, tools, and equipment technology, is not as easily converted to a virtual environment. The industry's outreach to potential customers is limited, and their communication channels are significantly hit by the pandemic worldwide.

For many participants, networking is a key argument for attending an international spine meeting. Informal exchanges with colleagues over a coffee break, meeting former colleagues, or meeting new spine specialists from around the world is something that does not translate into the digital world as easily as a podium presentation or a keynote lecture. While this sounds strange in the times of ever-present social media platforms, the reason for limited informal networking is the lack of a shared physical experience. No chatter in the lines for a cab, no exchange over registration, and no one you would bump into accidentally after many years.

But these contacts, these informal discussions with your seat neighbor, or your co-moderator once the microphone is turned off is unique and very valuable at any large spine meeting.

So maybe the 2021 meeting season might be the best ever: lessons learned and opportunities kept from the digital fallout of the pandemic and the opportunity for physical meetings at the same time.

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