

Audiences Have Rights Too

Many prosthodontists belong to several organizations, attend meetings, enroll in continuing education courses, and in general, try to keep abreast of current concepts and technology. In the process one is exposed to a number of individuals with varying concepts and principles. Most of these prosthodontists are very serious, dedicated individuals seeking to share their knowledge. Others are, frankly, entrepreneurs with little in mind but the advancement of their own careers or products.

Many meetings are filled with an array of speakers who have spent hours photographing and documenting their philosophies and practices. Some of the photography is absolutely striking. Some of these are accompanied by computer generated slides that zoom in and out, with bright, eye-catching colors. The audience may be properly awestruck with the speaker's command of the language and magnificent graphics. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to step back and ask, "What did it all mean? Beneath the glitz and the glitter, what is the message?"

If one reads the literature from meetings held during the first third of this century it can be seen that these meetings produced scientific papers that were read before the body and then discussed incisively and, sometimes, very aggressively. Points and counterpoints were documented and some rather well-known international conflicts arose between individuals with different philosophies.

After papers were presented the points were pondered and challenged, rebuttals were expected, and support was welcomed. Within the confines of the science as it was known new principles were verified or refuted. For these presentations, there were no visuals, no graphics, virtually no projected images. By today's standards, the format was dull—but no one could ever read the papers and the account of the ensuing debate and feel that the meetings could have been boring. Furthermore, the profession was small enough, that speakers knew one another, and few hidden agendas were left unexposed. From such meetings, our basis for the specialty was derived and, slowly, science emerged.

The question I must ask is, "Have our conferences, lectures, meetings, and congresses advanced or declined with the advent of the new media?" I must admit, I believe we have both advanced and declined. New audio-visual techniques allow fantastic visualization of concepts and as new technologies develop, even more dramatic methods will enhance our learning. However,

some of these merely gloss over the fact that the message is weak and documentation is missing. I fear that we have often let the medium replace the message. Is it that we have become numbed by all the media that vie for our attention and our money through television, motion pictures, and even billboards? Has the wrapping become more important than the package? Do we demand that any message be sugar coated and easily swallowed?

I recently watched a sequence of different presentors document the "superiority" of their favorite ceramic material, each apparently contradicting the other with photographs of clearly superior results. These images included amazing photographs of light transilluminating the restoration from palatal to facial, showing the natural translucency. No one challenged the speakers, no one questioned the relevance of light passing from the palatal to the facial. (Such a phenomenon would seem to occur only following the aberrant placement of a proctoscope or following some horrendous trauma to the cervical spine.) Everyone seemed merely to accept each successive speakers viewpoint. How sad that no moderator asked cogent questions or provided relevant challenge.

If one has a paper presented in a creditable journal, it is required that any proprietary relationships that might result in bias or predispose to even well-intentioned misinterpretation be made known. This is rarely if ever required of speakers. I think our media for oral professional scientific presentations would do well to ensure that there is time for rebuttal and for response by those who have sincere and valid questions. I also believe that every major organization should require that every speaker clearly announce any relationships with commercial interests relative to the presentation being made.

When speakers are sponsored by companies, the overhead of a meeting is decreased. While this makes meetings more accessible, it may also compromise integrity if the relationships of the speakers to the sponsoring product are not identified. Perhaps every organization might add to their policy statements the requirement that all commercial sponsorship must be disclosed, or possibly national or international parent organizations might require this of their constituent organizations and members.

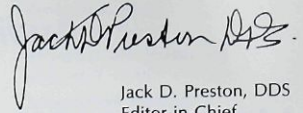
The potential for deception is too great to allow petty motives to defraud an audience. Even when the speaker is sincere and properly states the facts as they

are known, the listener has the right to know the presenter's background.

I must admit, I still enjoy reading the accounts of the early meetings. They may have been unscientific by our standards today, but they were forthright, honest, and direct. I hope we can keep the attractiveness of the media, without resorting to the atmosphere of the circus. I hope these thoughts might challenge a few organizations, including some to which I belong, to alter their format and their policy.

The development of a conference program is an onerous task. It also carries with it some moral obli-

gations. Every person in the audience has the right of complete disclosure from the presenter, and I believe all would benefit if the opportunity for challenge and rebuttal were allowed. Only then can we term these meetings "scientific sessions."



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Erratum

Figs 4 and 6 were erroneously interchanged in *Compressive Strength of Two Modern All-Ceramic Crowns* by Dr Lothar Pröbster, *Int J Prosthodont* 1992;5:409-414. We apologize for the error.