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Virtual Conferences:

An Opportunity for Psychiatrists Working in Developing Countries

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted almost all face-to-face psychiatric conferences across the world in 2020 due to restrictions on travel and social gatherings. Psychiatric conferences have always played a significant role in helping psychiatrists, especially those working in nonacademic settings, to update their knowledge regarding various developments in academic psychiatry as well as their clinical skills through various high-quality training workshops. Moreover, such programs also provided opportunities to meet old friends and collaborators/mentors.

Responding to the challenging situations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many psychiatric organizations rapidly shifted conference proceedings to a virtual format and conducted conferences successfully. The World Psychiatric Association recently conducted their 20th congress in a virtual format from March 10 to March 13, 2021, which was originally scheduled to be held in Bangkok, Thailand. The conference included both live streaming as well as recorded sessions. Moreover, the conference proceedings were also made available for all registered participants on demand until June 13, 2021.

Whether virtual conferences achieve the main goals of face-to-face psychiatric conferences is a topic of debate.¹ Even though a virtual format can meet some of the major goals such as education, research, and skill development of the participants, it cannot provide networking opportunities among colleagues as in a face-to-face format. Moreover, the virtual format also may fail to provide a rigorous academic environment wherein academicians interested in a topic gather in large numbers and debate developments in their field during live presentations as well as during breaks. In spite of all these shortcomings, there are some clear benefits in this shift in format of psychiatric conferences for psychiatrists practicing in developing countries.

Previously, attending a reputed world psychiatric conference required significant registration and travel costs. Many of the developing countries have no provision to financially support psychiatrists working in nonacademic settings to attend such costly conferences. Moreover,

attending a conference requires physicians to be away from their clinical practice for a significant period of time, which also negatively affects income. Virtual psychiatric conferences greatly help psychiatrists working in developing countries to overcome financial as well as geographical constraints to attend any conference in their area of interest in psychiatry. Moreover, many psychiatric organizations significantly reduced the registration fee for attending their virtual conferences compared to in-person events in previous years. Some reputed organizations also made registration to their virtual events completely free for any participants from anywhere in the world. For example, the 19th Latest Advances in Psychiatry Symposium was conducted in a virtual format by the International Society for Affective Disorders and was available to every registered participant free of cost. Previous editions of this symposium were conducted at the Royal College of Physicians in London, England, and a registration fee (> £200 [US \$277]) was required to register for the event.

Beyond financial benefits, virtual formats also provide unique practical advantages over in-person conferences. The app created for conducting virtual conferences provides the opportunity to create a personalized agenda, and participants can easily plan which sessions to attend live in advance. The availability of sessions on demand beyond the conference period enables participants to listen to academic sessions in their free time. Moreover, the chat box option to ask questions or obtain clarifications associated with each live presentation provides a unique opportunity for participants with language issues to ask questions freely after drafting their questions carefully.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way in which psychiatry conferences were conducted worldwide: from face-to-face to virtual. All of the available evidence suggests that this shift is going to persist in 2021. Considering the clear benefits of virtual conferences for psychiatrists working in developing countries, it is prudent to plan future psychiatric conferences in a hybrid format (in-person/virtual) in the post pandemic period so that the maximum number of psychiatrists across the world can benefit from such events without significant financial burden and travel needs.

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