

A Primer on Scientific and Professional Conferences, Part 1: Professional Development Through Active Participation in a Conference

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People attend scientific and professional conferences for a variety of reasons. Whether you are contemplating attending your first conference, or looking forward to your 30th, this article seeks to provide the physical therapy professional with some valuable information on how to make the most of your experience.

While you might think the primary goal of attending is to partake of educational experiences, scientific and professional conferences also offer valuable professional development opportunities for physical therapists (PTs) and physical therapist assistants (PTAs). The American Physical Therapy Association's (APTA's) National Conferences, in particular, provide innumerable opportunities to visit beautiful destination cities, meet other professionals with whom you can collaborate, and get involved with the inner workings of the association. A well-spent long weekend in the midst of these kinds of activities can allow you to reflect on your practice and return to work with a renewed sense of perspective, fresh ideas, and the energy to implement them.

The APTA sponsors two major national conferences, and one major regional conference per year. The national conferences are the *Annual Conference and Exposition* and the *Combined Sections Meeting* (CSM), and the regional conference is *Preview 2020*, which was recently held in Phoenix, Arizona. *Preview 2020* is a relatively new conference, and is designed to provide professionals in various regions of the country the opportunity to gain access to content critical to the achievement of Vision 2020. It is a smaller conference than the other two, and is comprised primarily of educational sessions.

We will focus on CSM for the purposes of this article, as it is the primary forum for business meetings, educational programs, and networking opportunities for Acute Care Section members. And, it is coming up soon! CSM will be held in Nashville, TN, from February 6th – 9th, 2008.

The educational sessions that are offered at CSM have been developed by each section's educational program committees, and endeavor to meet the needs of attendees by focusing on

topics of interest that have been identified based on feedback from the membership, the sense of current practice needs, and developing trends in health policy, research, and clinical practice. Some presenters are specifically sought out by the educational program committee based on their known expertise in a particular topic, and their presentations are carefully crafted in collaboration with one or more members of the committee. Other programs have been chosen through a review process which ensures that the proposals and programs are well-developed and evidence-based. Some of these presenters will also be well-recognized experts, leaders or authors, but others will be colleagues with less experience presenting in a national forum. The educational program committee works with all presenters to ensure that they are effective in what they are doing, and that attendees are provided with a valuable learning experience. It is the foremost desire of the educational program committee to provide presentations that address cutting-edge science and the full breadth of professional practice issues.

Components of a Combined Sections Meeting Conference

Pre-Conference Programs are one or two day intensive courses that are focused on specific areas of professional and/or clinical practice relative to the specialty sections that sponsor them. Pre-conference course programming is typically driven by the needs expressed by the membership of a specialty section, and the experience is often tailored to the audience because of a relatively small number of attendees. These courses run at the conference site, but prior to the opening of the full conference. There is an additional registration fee for these courses, so you will want to figure this in when planning your budget.

Opening Ceremonies kick off the conference on the Wednesday evening of CSM. There is a keynote speaker who has been chosen to deliver a powerful and energizing message, and the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialists (ABPTS) recognizes all of the individuals who have earned board certification in a recognized

specialty area. This is generally followed by a large reception in an adjacent ballroom area, which features scrumptious hors d'oeuvres (free) and a cash bar. The opening reception is a wonderful place to meet colleagues, network, and share ideas with other professionals. You never know when a chance meeting at opening ceremonies could turn into an interesting opportunity for further collaboration or conversation over the rest of the conference.

Educational Sessions officially begin with a *Multi-Section Program* on the Thursday morning of CSM. This session is unopposed, meaning that it is the only programming that occurs for the first time block of the conference. This is designed to attract every member of every section, and thus the topic for the program is one which holds significance to all PTs and PTAs, regardless of special interest section, clinical area of expertise, or level of experience. This program occurs in a large ballroom space, and regularly features speakers and guests who are well-recognized leaders.

After the multi-section program, three full days of educational sessions ensue. The length of presentations is generally between one and four hours. All educational sessions are listed in the conference program by section *and* by day. Often, educational sessions developed by one section may be of interest to another section. In those cases, those sections may choose to collaborate and co-sponsor a session, or a series of sessions. In this case, the session(s) will be listed under BOTH sections in the program. Since 'acuity' transcends the focus of all of the other specialty sections, we tend to jointly sponsor a large amount of educational programming at CSM.

Honorary or invited lectures are unique presentations. These often have a tradition of honoring past leaders and visionaries in our profession. The presenters are nominated and selected through a rigorous review process and they are provided with a forum to address issues facing the profession, and to advocate for their vision for the profession. You can expect these

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presentations to be vibrant, informative and inspiring. These are also generally highlighted in the front of the on-site program, and you will find them listed on the schedules under the heading of the sponsoring section(s). Examples at CSM include the Eugene Michels Researchers' Forum, the Pauline Cerasoli Lecture and the Linda Crane Lecture.

Platform and poster presentations provide yet another type of experience at professional conferences. These presentations are usually reports on research and scientific work completed by the authors; special interest reports (e.g., case reports, projects to enhance the practice of physical therapy); or theory reports (e.g., developing concepts or models).

Platform presentations are roughly 15 minutes in length, and are clustered together in two or three hour blocks. Opportunities often exist for audience members to ask questions of the presenter(s). In some cases, the authors of a 'set' of platform presentations will be pulled together as a panel at the end of the session, with a moderator to lead discussion between the audience and panelists.

Poster presentations are reports in which the information is shared through written and graphic material presented on a poster. The posters are available for general viewing and there are assigned times when the poster presenter will be in attendance for questions or discussion about their poster. In addition, the Acute Care Section invites both poster and platform presenters to attend our *Business Meeting and Reception* (see below) so that members may interact with them in a more casual atmosphere.

Business Meetings and Receptions are wonderful opportunities to meet with the leaders of our profession. These meetings are a mix of the formal business required to run an organization such as the Acute Care Section, and an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of the Section and its members. Business rolls over to a reception, with many opportunities to network with section leadership and conference speakers. These meetings and receptions provide the opportunity to contribute your recommendations for the profession and to volunteer to help implement them. Refreshments are usually available to enhance the celebration.

The conference may contain other special activities for learning, professional dialogue or socializing. One example is the *roundtable*. This activity usually runs for one hour and involves a room with tables labeled with different topics and each table also has a facilitator. This arrangement provides a rich opportunity to share theories and strategies with colleagues and it is also a wonderful opportunity to meet colleagues for collaboration or support in professional endeavors.

The **Exhibit Hall** is packed full of companies displaying their products and services. This provides a wonderful opportunity to evaluate and compare new products, investigate career and educational opportunities, see demonstrations and visit with colleagues. There are even complimentary refreshments available. There are *'unopposed exhibit hall breaks'* on the conference schedule, so that you can take advantage of the hall without missing educational programming sessions or meeting.

Near the Exhibit Hall there will be an area with **Section and Auxiliary tables**. These tables display information about the 18 Sections of the APTA, ranging from Acute Care to Women's Health. These tables are staffed by section members, so this is the place to meet up with colleagues from the Section, find out about activities or to volunteer to get involved in the Section's programs. You can also find out about special section activities at the conference, and pick up section publications. If you are a member of a section, pick up your identifying ribbon at the section table, and display it on your conference badge so that other section members can recognize you.

Finally, it is also typical for busy professionals at a conference to also have some business to attend to while away from their homes, offices, and regular lives. Most conference facilities have *'serendipitous meeting areas'* scattered throughout. The vast majority of these spaces have wireless internet access and power supplies for plugging-in laptops and peripherals. If you absolutely *must* complete business tasks while you are at the conference, try setting yourself up at one of these areas for an hour or two. In this venue, you get to observe the meetings and behaviors of other conference attendees, look for people you might want to collaborate with,

and 'be seen' yourself. You would be surprised at who might like to network with YOU, and if you are visible during transitional times at the conference, this helps.

HINTS FOR SUCCESS

We would like to provide a few hints about how to get the most out of conferences.

Get the lay of the land. Might seem silly, but time your route from hotel room to various venues at the convention. Some sites are VERY spread out, and you will want to have a very good idea of how long it will take you to get from area to area. This will help to ensure that you get seats at the programming you want to see most. In addition to finding hot spots for educational sessions, you'll want to scope out bathrooms, coffee carts, business centers, nearby restaurants, etc. Be sure to leave extra time for congested elevators and last-minute room changes that are bound to occur at a conference of this size.

Dress for success. You will meet many colleagues who may collaborate with you professionally, refer patients to you, or they may even join you in practice, so make the right impression. Wear your conference nametag so that these new acquaintances can better learn your name. Also dress for comfort- especially your shoes. You will spend lots of time on your feet and there is usually lots of walking at conferences. Temperature control inside large conference centers is a challenge, especially with the large number of participants at a convention like CSM. Try to layer so that you can add or subtract warmth with ease. Bring plenty of business cards... if you don't have any, make some! Wear section membership ribbons (available at section tables- see above) so that other members of your sections can identify you as a colleague with shared interests.

Be prepared. A conference offers multiple educational tracks. If you are not in the right place at the right time you will miss lectures, ceremonies or even prizes. One strategy is to bring a hi-lighter and then as soon as you get the agenda for the conference hi-light your priorities. It's always good to have backup choices in case you find a session is cancelled or has met capacity seating when you get to it. (Yes, sessions *do get cancelled* on occasion. The on-site program goes to press in September, and a lot can happen between September and February.) You may

also want to bring along a bag or tote to hold all of the papers and gadgets that can be collected at conferences. Water stations are usually plentiful, but a bottle of water is suggested nonetheless. You should also plan to bring some small snacks to help get you through the day.

Presentation handouts. The handouts that accompany presentations are provided on the APTA's website and **are not handed out at the presentations.** Registered participants will be provided with access to all of the conference's handouts (as long as these are provided by the speaker – be prepared that not all presenters will provide them) before the conference, and access will remain available for several months after the conference. Some people choose to pre-print their own handouts prior to attending the conference. Others simply bring a plain note pad and paper, and augment the web based handouts with their own notes once they return from conference. Still others download the handouts to their laptops, and make notes electronically during the sessions that they attend. Either way, simplicity is key. Remember that you can always obtain DVD audio of the sessions that are of greatest interest to you and take notes later. Sometimes you get more out of presentations when you sit and listen!

Visit the exhibitors. The exhibitors at the conference are our friends. Each pays a fee to participate in the conference and that reduces the cost to attend the conference. Most of the exhibitors that you meet have been supporting the profession for many years by attending conferences, advertising and participating in our fundraisers. Visit them, learn from them, and keep them in mind when it comes time to make equipment selections for your institution or your patients.

Say hello. Networking really does work, so bring along your business cards. Hint- the people sitting near you are just as shy and apprehensive as you are, so help them out. Venture a few greetings and soon you will be meeting colleagues with lots to share. Learn about the innovation and expertise that exists among our colleagues. Our profession is advancing through the collective efforts of PTs and PTAs, so make the most of this opportunity by learning what others are doing and by sharing how you have been contributing to our profession.

Have you heard of someone that you would like to meet? Want to see if an old classmate or long-lost colleague might be there also? There is always a list of conference registrants near

the registration area, which is also conveniently located near the **message center.** Here, you will find alphabetized boxes, message slips, and pencils. Here you may leave messages for individuals that you would like to meet up with. And check your box too... you never know if someone is trying to look YOU up!

Have fun! Don't plan every minute. Pace yourself and enjoy the experience. Treat yourself to at least one nice dinner with colleagues. Plan to see or do something fun in the destination city. *When in Rome...* Do some homework before you go. Find out what you can about the city you will be visiting and identify a handful of things you might like to experience there.

Don't drop your workout routine. It is easy to drop your daily workout routine when away at a conference, but we would urge you to keep this part of your daily custom intact. First of all, the conference hotels and others in the vicinity of a convention center typically have outstanding exercise facilities, and even spa-like atmospheres with all kinds of extra amenities. Pamper yourself, clear your head, and move your body as you normally would at home, or try something new. It helps keep you focused in the sometimes chaotic atmosphere of a conference as large as CSM. Secondly, you will find hundreds of other physical therapists doing the same thing! Another excellent venue for networking with other professionals.

Get involved. If you are concerned about issues affecting our profession and want to see changes you should talk to the officers and committee chairs. Visit the section's table frequently, and you will have ample opportunity to meet with them. The Acute Care Section's leadership is made up of PTs and PTAs who volunteer their time and services to advance the profession. Our vision is:

“To help achieve APTA's Vision 2020, the Acute Care Section will elevate the practice of physical therapy in the management and health of individuals with multiple and/or complex conditions through the integration and triangulation of primary care competencies in education, practice, and research. The Acute Care Section will provide resources for clinicians to achieve practice mastery that recognizes the necessity of critical thinking, interdependence, and professionalism required for autonomous practice” (Acute Care Section, 2007).

Gaining your participation in CSM is one step towards implementing this vision. Whether you

attend this year or in the future we hope that it will be a wonderful professional development activity and your springboard for involvement in the Acute Care Section. Look for *Part 2* in the next edition of Acute Care Perspectives. In that installment, we will discuss strategies for the successful development and submission of proposals to present at conferences.

References

1. APTA. National Meetings. From: <http://www.apta.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Conferences&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=48&ContentID=41014>. Accessed October 6, 2007.
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