

# *A Primer on Scientific and Professional Conferences*

## *Part 2: How to Successfully Submit a Proposal and Present at a Conference*

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### **APTA's Conferences**

Conferences sponsored by professional organizations provide a forum for the disbursement and analysis of evolving knowledge and issues related to professional practice. The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) runs two conferences providing members the opportunity to share their scholarship with the community. The *Annual Conference and Exposition* is held annually in June and the *Combined Sections Meeting (CSM)* is held annually in February. Most of the presentations at these conferences are provided by physical therapists (PTs).

Before you stop reading this article because you think it is not intended for you, please consider the following. The authors recommend that clinicians in hospitals, and other environments in which acute care services are provided, have a wealth of experience that needs to be shared with the professional community. For example, if you encounter an unusual case or patient response, if you are implementing an innovative strategy in your practice, or if you are investigating new techniques for patient/client management, *you* should share that information with the profession. You might also wish to obtain feedback in a collegial forum from other clinicians on what you and your co-workers have been doing. One very practical way to do that is by presenting at a conference. Our goals in this article are to persuade you, the clinician, that your voice is needed in this kind of professional forum; and to assuage your concerns by outlining the process and recommending strategies that will foster your success in developing and providing a presentation.

The CSM is the Acute Care Section's primary forum for the dissemination and analysis of new information and clinical strategies, facilitation of discussions of importance to the profession, and provision of optimal conditions for germination of the professional networking that is critical for the advancement of acute care clinical practice. Therefore, CSM will be the model

used to describe the process to follow to propose and offer a presentation. The strategies described here also apply to many other scientific conferences.

### **The Call for Proposals**

CSM uses a review process to vet and select which presentations will be provided at the conference. This process does not ensure that each presentation will be exciting and informative, but it does ensure that the proposed presentation has merit and relevance to acute care physical therapy. The first phase in the process is a "call for proposals" and a "call for abstracts." The publication of these begins more than a year in advance of the conference. The calls are publicized in the profession's publications, such as an accompaniment to *Physical Therapy*, inclusion in *Acute Care Perspectives* and identification on the APTA's and the Section's web sites. The submission deadline is usually eight to ten months prior to the conference.

### **Types of Presentations**

The first step in the development of a proposal is to determine the best format for the presentation. Three forums for presenting information are available: educational sessions, poster presentations and platform presentations. The *educational sessions* usually run from one to four hours, and occasionally longer, with content at an appropriate depth and breadth for a professional conference. *Platform presentations* are 15 minute instructional sessions on a focused topic. *Poster presentations* are educational reports in which the information is shared through written and graphic material presented on a poster. The posters are made available for general viewing with an assigned time when the presenters will be in attendance to answer questions about their work.

We recommend that less experienced presenters will have greater success starting with a platform or poster presentation. The presenter should also evaluate both the content and her/his strengths to determine whether a platform or a poster presentation will be most successful. We offer some

general guidelines below.

### **Submission of a Proposal**

All proposals for presentations are submitted through a website that is accessed from the APTA's home site ([www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)) and then going to the site for *Combined Sections Meeting*. The individual submitting a proposal must go through that site and create an account, and that account will be password-protected so that only that individual can access it. The site will contain the instructions for preparing and submitting the proposal. Information that is submitted is saved so the author can leave that site and return at another time to add or change information. An author may also submit multiple proposals each year.

### **Submitting a Platform or Poster Proposal**

When preparing a poster or platform proposal so far in advance of a presentation date, it is understood that some of the analysis and development of content may not have taken place yet. Do not be intimidated by this process, as the reviewers of the proposal appreciate that the information is being compiled well in advance of the conference and that additional analysis will occur prior to the actual presentation. However, every effort should be made to make the proposal as complete and thorough as possible, as this is the information that will become the record of the presentation when it is published in *Acute Care Perspectives*.

The categories for platform and poster presentations are the report on *research* or scientific work completed by the author; a *special interest* report, e.g., a report on a project to enhance the practice of physical therapy or one on innovations in clinical practice; a *case study* report; or a *theory* report, e.g., a developing concept or theory.

Each of these proposals requires the submission of different types of information as described here.

The components of a **research report** proposal are:

- Title
- Purpose/hypothesis
- Number of subjects
- Methods/materials
- Results
- Conclusions
- Clinical relevance

Perhaps you have recently participated in an academic course requiring you to identify a clinical question and design a strategy to collect and analyze data. Why not take this project to the next level and prepare it for presentation?

Examples of Research Reports Presented at CSM 2008 are:

- An Analysis of Rehabilitation Therapy Intensity and Functional Outcomes in a Long Term Care Hospital. Nuzzo, N., Boebel, M., Shott, S. (Poster)
- Lessons Learned From Patient Satisfaction Reviews. Wruble Hakim, E. (Platform)

The components of a **special interest report** proposal are:

- Title
- Purpose
- Description
- Summary
- Importance to members

Because of the nature of our practice, Acute Care Physical Therapy is full of opportunities for special interest discussions. The examples below demonstrate the range of possibilities, from bridging the gap between academic and clinical communities to dealing with the ever-present referral management issues that face us all in facility-based practice. Perhaps you are working on something for continuous quality improvement, and reach some interesting conclusions that might have broader implications. Write them up!

- The Acute Care Internship: A New Model of Mentorship Bridging Clinical Education and Employment. Adler, J. (Platform)
- Improving the Response Time to Physical Therapy Referrals in the Acute Care Setting. Fradette, J.,

Orest, M., Cone, C. (Poster)

The components of a **case study** report are:

- Title
- Background and purpose
- Case description
- Outcomes
- Discussion

The case report has undergone a renaissance of sorts, and the unpredictability and complexity of acute care health needs lend themselves very well to this type of delivery format. Acute care clinicians see it all! Share what you have seen, and how you have handled it.

Examples of Case Reports presented at CSM 2008 are:

- Intensive Physical Therapy of a Mechanically Ventilated Patient in the Medical Intensive Care Unit: A Case Review. Scardillo, J., Rossi, J., Zanni, J., Ciesla, N., Pradhan, P., Korupolu, R., Needham, D. (Platform)
- Locomotor Recovery in a Patient With Cerebrovascular Accident to Enable Cardiac Transplantation. Friedman, E., Brady, L. (Poster)

The components of a **theory report** are:

- Title
- Abstract body

We have not had any recent submissions for theory reports, but we look forward to getting some in the future.

Determining whether you should use a poster or platform approach to disseminate your content is largely a personal decision. Some individuals prefer to speak to an assembled group using visual aids within a structured time frame, with minimal opportunity for exchange with an audience. This type of presenter will do well in a platform session, which is generally scheduled with a group of presentations and moderated by a colleague. When developing a platform presentation, one should be careful to consider the time frame and the needs of an audience to see and understand any visual data that will be used. For example, small font size on slides and multiple flow charts and graphs should be avoided as

all content should be large enough for the audience to easily see. For individuals who like a less formal timetable and are interested in generating discussion about their work, poster presentations allow for a great deal more interaction between the author and interested parties. As with platform presentations, poster font size, colors, and graphics should have an aesthetically pleasing appearance while being large enough to see and understand. Less is sometimes more.

### Preparing an Educational Session Proposal

Development of an educational session proposal is on a slightly different time frame than that of a platform or poster, but it is still well in advance of the meeting. The call for proposals establishes the criteria for acceptance, and for the CSM the “selection of proposals will be based on their foundation in evidence, clarity, probability of interest to participants, fiscal feasibility, and space and time constraints” (APTA, 2007). Therefore, proposals should address these topics within the framework of their components when prepared for submission. The components of a proposal include the course title, description, learning objectives, instructional level, outline, references and speaker information.

We recommend the first step in developing the proposal be the establishment of the learning objectives for those who attend the presentation. Those objectives will also provide the presenters with a guide as the presentation is developed. A proposal for an educational session at CSM must contain three to five learning objectives and these must be stated in behavioral terms. Therefore, the objectives should describe what the attendee will be able to do or demonstrate after the presentation. Behavioral terms might include the expectation that the attendee will be able to “describe,” “perform,” “administer,” “measure,” “identify,” “demonstrate,” “justify,” or “evaluate.” Descriptions that the attendee “will understand” or “will have knowledge” are not behavioral terms and are not appropriate.

The next step should be the development of a description of the course. The

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description is a narrative that will explain to potential attendees the type and content of the presentation. Session descriptions must be less than 150 words so this should be edited judiciously so that the critical components of the course are identified.

The submission must also contain references that identify the evidence supporting the content that will be provided in the presentation. A minimum of five references, from sources within the last five years, must be provided so that the presentation may qualify attendees for receipt of continuing education units; inclusion of additional references will strengthen the proposal.

Once these pieces are in place, determining the title of the course becomes easier. The title should be a concise description of the specific issues to be addressed within the presentation. Potential attendees should be able to determine from the title if the session is of interest to them, and if the course is of interest, they can rely on the description and learning objectives for additional details.

#### Evaluation of Proposals

The choice of all three types of proposals is a juried process in which the submission is reviewed by a committee. The process does not provide the committee members with identities of the presenters, so that the proposal is evaluated on the merits of the submitted content. The Acute Care Section's evaluation addresses the domains of design, importance to the field and the quality of the proposal.

The evaluation of the *design* of the proposal for poster and platform presentation is an assessment of the design and methods applied to an investigation. Other types of proposals will be evaluated on the design of the instructional activities to ensure effective learning by participants.

The topic of *importance to the field* is evaluated relative to the general interest and applicability of the topic to physical therapists, physical therapist assistants and students. The proposal for a platform or

poster presentation is submitted directly to one of the 18 Sections of the APTA. Therefore a submission to the Acute Care Section is an appropriate "fit" if it addresses the physical therapist's management of complex conditions. Note that this is not restricted to hospital-based practice. A proposal for an education session is submitted for review by any of the Sections of the APTA and the submitter is charged with identifying the two sections that appear to be the best forums for that presentation. Because of the breadth of proposals, the submitter should be considerate about identifying appropriate Sections so that the proposal is directed to appropriate reviewers.

The proposal is also evaluated relative to the *quality* of the writing in the proposal. Submitting a proposal that is logical, organized and clearly written is important. The language and content of the proposal should also comply with APTA policies, the language in the *Guide to Physical Therapist Practice* (APTA, 2003) and with people-first language.

#### Language of the Proposal

The language and terms in the proposal should be consistent with the language and terms used to describe patient/client management. For example, addressing the physical therapist's responsibilities of examination, evaluation, and determination of a prognosis is appropriate. In contrast, using language such as receiving "orders" for services (rather than "consultation" or "referral") or the "delegation" of services (rather than "direction and supervision") is inappropriate.

The APTA has a policy that "Physical therapy practitioners have an obligation to provide nonjudgmental care to all people who need it. They should be guided in their written and spoken communication by the *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities*. APTA members are encouraged to use appropriate terminology for specific disabilities as outlined in the *Guidelines*. Furthermore, all members should put people first, not their disability, when communicating about a patient/client"

(APTA, HOD P06-91-25-34). Therefore, all communication in the proposal and in the presentation should adhere to the use of people-first language. In the proposal a person, group or population may not be referred to by a disability or condition, and terms that could be considered biasing or discriminatory in any way must be removed. An appropriate description is "people with cardiac conditions" instead of "cardiac patients" or "my patient who was depressed" rather than "my depressed patient." The *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities* provide more information and are available on the WWW from the Schiefelbusch Institute for Lifespan Studies at [www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html](http://www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html).

#### Proposal Content

In summary, the process for the review of a proposal is not a formative process with the opportunity for feedback and improvement. Therefore, when developing a proposal the developer(s) should edit carefully and they should solicit critical review from colleagues prior to submission. Additional resources for constructive feedback include the *Members Mentoring Members* program (an APTA member benefit, accessed through [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org) under the 'Tools and Resources' link), individuals within a local physical therapy academic institution, and the Education Committee of the Acute Care Section. A strong support system is available, but it needs to be accessed.

#### Conference Fees and Honorariums

A fee of \$25.00 is associated with the submission of each abstract for a poster or platform presentation. The fee is applied to defray a portion of the expense of the web-based platform used to manage the submissions. No fee associated is with submission of a proposal for an educational session.

All conference attendees are expected to pay the registration cost for attending a conference. At CSM, for example, presenters of platform and poster presentations must register for the conference. Presenters of educational

sessions do not need to register to attend the conference on the day that they are presenting. However, attendance on any other day will require registration and a reduced registration fee is available.

No reimbursement is provided for presenters of platform or poster presentations. Some of the sections do not provide an honorarium to those who present educational sessions at CSM, as it is considered a professional responsibility and honor to present at the conference. The Acute Care Section does provide an honorarium of \$200 per speaking hour (divided among presenters, if more than one) to presenters of educational sessions.

### Successful Presentations

Many factors determine the success of a presentation. One of the most important is preparation. Presenters should be prepared for an interested audience of colleagues. As scientists and professionals, these colleagues will expect that the presentation will be evidence-based and the presenter(s) should be conversant in the literature related to the topic. However, presenters should not feel pressured to be an expert on all issues. Question and answer sessions are a wonderful opportunity to solicit information and recommendations from an audience of colleagues who are valuable resources.

Presenters should be considerate of the audience at CSM, which will contain physical therapists, physical therapist assistants and physical therapy students. The presenter should use inclusive terms where appropriate. Since referring to “physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and physical therapy students” is awkward, referring to “clinicians” may be easier.

One important resource to presenters is the “Speakers’ Ready Room,” which will be available at the conference facilities. This room contains the same technology that will be used for the presentation, so the presenter has the opportunity to become comfortable with the equipment and to practice prior to the presentation. This room is also the place to pick up a “speaker” ribbon to be displayed on a name badge. The room is staffed by the APTA and it is where you will find a reassuring

resource to answer any questions you have as you count down to taking the stage for a successful presentation.

### Conclusion

Combined Sections Meeting is a valuable forum for dialogue about the science of healing and the art of caring. Members of the Acute Care Section should contribute to this dialogue as presenters of posters, platform presentations and educational sessions, and those contributions are important to the advancement of acute care physical therapy. We look forward to your presentation at an upcoming CSM and we encourage you to contact us with any questions that you have.

### References

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