

Meeting Mindfulness

A quick guide to attending educational meetings and conferences as a vitreoretinal surgical fellow.

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July heralds not only the beginning of a new academic year and the start of fellowship for first-year vitreoretinal surgical fellows throughout the country, but also a busy season of meetings, including the American Society of Retina Specialists (ASRS) annual meeting, July 10-14, 2015. Here, three second-year fellows provide tips to maximize the value of national meetings during one's retina fellowship.



— Bryan Kun Hong, MD; M. Ali Khan, MD; and Jayanth Sridhar, MD

If you are planning to submit an abstract to a meeting for presentation, it is essential to map out deadlines well in advance. For example, the ASRS annual meeting typically has a deadline toward the end of January in the same calendar year, while the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) annual meeting requires abstract submission by early December of the previous calendar year. Most meetings have research awards for fellows that have separate deadlines and requirements, which may include full research papers and recommendation letters. In addition to prestige, awards may come with travel funds, which are always helpful for the fiscally conscious retina fellow.

Be mindful of on-call schedules and clinic coverage when planning to attend a meeting. Many fellowships emphasize camaraderie and teamwork between fellows to ensure that clinical care remains smooth while conference opportunities are divvied up equally. Coverage contingency plans should be prepared in advance. Some programs traditionally send first-year fellows to certain meetings and second-year fellows to others. The standard rule of thumb in the first year of fellowship is to keep it simple: present, learn, and meet. For second-year fellows, conferences will be hot spots for formal and informal job interviews.

ALWAYS BE PREPARED

Preparation is essential for meetings, and it starts with knowing what each meeting offers and therefore which meeting will benefit you most. Each academic meeting is unique in terms of style and flavor. Larger annual meetings hosted by ASRS, ARVO, and the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) offer wonderful learning and networking experiences on

a large scale. Smaller meetings, such as those of the Retina Society and Macula Society, offer more intimate environments in which to interact with colleagues and prominent faculty. The Vit-Buckle Society (VBS) is a newer meeting with increasing popularity that orients many presentations, including a surgical video session, toward fellows. Additionally, conferences in pediatric retina, uveitis, and ocular oncology are available to fellows developing those more specific interests.

Dress Codes

It is wise to find out about the typical dress code for each meeting. Flip-flops and sunglasses, for example, are not out of place at a VBS meeting, and business casual attire is appropriate for ARVO. Still, always pack formal attire for dinner meetings and galas attached to these meetings.

Know Your Stuff

If you plan to attend as a presenter, knowing your own data and the literature are key. You may meet the authors of papers that were cited, so being well-read

At a Glance

- Second-year fellows' experiences and goals at retina meetings differ from those of their first year.
- Preparation—from knowing what clothes to wear to which studies to cite—is key.
- Meetings are excellent forums for networking with colleagues and industry professionals.

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on references is always a good idea. Make posters viewer-friendly and presentable, and be cordial with those who stop to ask questions. When putting together a talk, practice thoroughly. Potential mentors or employers may attend your talk, and a smooth, efficient delivery is sure to impress. When practicing, try to stay well within the time limit for your session to avoid annoying the moderator by going over your time allotment.

Decide What Is Important

Keep in mind that most large meetings have specialty interest, networking, industry, and social events that occur simultaneously. Deciding what to attend and what to forgo will dictate your meeting experience. Attending events with past and current mentors is a fun and high-yield experience because of the opportunity to learn more about field leaders and their colleagues at a personal level outside of the hospital setting. However, senior physicians will often have social gatherings outside of the meeting. Thus, planning ahead by identifying when talks of special interest occur will be important. Make travel arrangements after reviewing the meeting program to ensure you do not miss that exciting talk that happens to be 30 minutes before your flight home.

Most meeting programs have a notes section as space to jot down ideas and thoughts you might gain from talks you attended. Many physicians prefer to electronically log new information in laptop computers or smartphones. Note that many meetings forbid the use of photography of research presentations and posters.

NETWORKING

The consensus is that for fellows, networking likely represents the most important aspect of conferences. There are several different high-yield methods of networking. First, obtain introductions through friends and mentors. Second, attend official networking and social events. Third, identify well-known retina specialists who serve as role models for your future aspirations

and reach out in advance of the conference to set up informal meetings. Often, e-mail addresses are available online for prominent members of the retina community. This can be an effective way of introducing yourself and establishing relationships, as most people are happy to help the younger generation of retina trainees. Fourth, be friendly and willing to reach out, for instance, by approaching a speaker who gave an interesting talk. The retina community is small, and the more people you meet, the better.

It is never too early to express interest in a job at a certain institution or practice, and meetings for second-year fellows occur with the job search in full swing, usually in summer and fall. Most encounters, whether with new or long-time friends, involve the all-important question “Where do you want to practice?” Employers are looking to hire good fellows, and their recruiting radars are turned on at meetings. Although some interviews are arranged in advance, impromptu job interviews, both official and informal, routinely take place at national meetings. Two minutes of face-to-face positive interaction with a prospective employer is worth 100 e-mails across the miles. Try to get the scoop at national conferences on what is available nationally or regionally in your area or areas of interest. Sales teams from device and pharmaceutical companies can be helpful in the process, as they travel throughout the country and know a lot about many practices, including which ones are hiring.

MAKE THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITY

Retina meetings are educational and fun. One of the best parts of being in retina is the camaraderie and community within the field. Plan ahead, submit abstracts, and enjoy one of the best aspects of fellowship training. ■

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