

Part 2: Good news, bad news at the international conference

BY PETER CACKETT

In the second instalment of this two-part article, our editor Peter Cackett presents the 'good news' and 'bad news' from an international conference experience.

Readers will remember that in the last issue I left you just as I was arriving at the conference centre, feeling slightly the worse for wear having succumbed to a jet lag-induced, interrupted night's sleep. The only plus was that, in my tired state, I had managed to work out how to use the customary 'Krypton Factor' hotel shower mechanism without startling myself with scalding or freezing cold water [1]. Also, the pancakes at breakfast came with jelly sweets (wahey!), and I justified the diabetes-inducing calories in anticipation that I might burn them off traipsing around the conference centre for the rest of the day. Anyway, in a Ronnie Corbett fashion, I digress. I have already had the delights of queuing at registration half an hour for my badge (that's got to be at least one pancake used up already) and our story continues in the main entrance hall...

Good news

Upon studying the lecture schedule planner, I notice that a US colleague is about to chair a session on cornea. Although it's not my specialty I might learn something, and I purposefully stride off along the labyrinthine corridors and escalators to find the meeting room.

Bad news

There are about a dozen people in the audience, which doesn't bode well. I wave at my friend on the stage and take a seat. I then look at the session itinerary which I really should have done before I actually entered the room. The agenda comprises six basic research papers on dry eye disease. Well, it could be interesting, I think optimistically. I struggle with the technical laboratory details within two minutes of the first paper and realise that the session is really not going to be for me. However, I stay the course of the session as I don't want to upset my friend by leaving early. I slowly lose the will to live, sitting there contemplating the next two hours of my life I will not get back again. I'm not feeling the love for the conference.



Good news

After the session, I meet another international colleague in the main foyer. We chat briefly and reminisce about the good old days when we trained together. I congratulate him again that he's done well with his career, despite studying at St. Mary's medical school. The old rivalries never die!

Bad news

I ask if he wants to get some lunch but he tells me that he has a research CRISPR meeting to go to [2]. I nod sagely as if I understand what on Earth he is talking about but all I hear is the word 'Krispie'. As he disappears off down a corridor all I can imagine is a room full of people talking about the merits of Rice Krispies. I wonder if there is something wrong with me.

Good news

I make my way to the exhibition hall where a multitude of companies are selling ophthalmic products and services. It's big and bright and there are lots of people thronging the arena. There also might be some pens and notepads up for grabs or even a free coffee. This has definitely got to be good!

Bad news

"In space, no one can hear you scream," was the tagline for the movie *Alien* (1979). This could equally have been written about the exhibition hall at an international



conference. The stands are full of people enthusiastically discussing products. However, the imaging systems for sale are ones my financially challenged NHS department will never purchase and I feel like the poor cousin looking on. I am already familiar with the majority of pharmaceutical products being advertised and could possibly quote the efficacy outcomes from all their Phase 3 drugs trials by heart. The queue for a free coffee is a mile long. I wander around aimlessly for a while on my own trying to find someone I recognise but to no avail. I imagine that everyone else is either engaged in something really interesting at the conference or is taking some downtime to enjoy the delights of the city outside.

In this cavernous and windowless industrial space, I feel as if my soul is being slowly crushed, a bit like a trip to B&Q in an out-of-town shopping centre on a rainy February afternoon. I eventually help myself to a free biro from one of the booths, smiling at the stall holder as I do so and simultaneously feel guilty about not engaging with them about the product for sale. I head for the exit. I'm still not feeling the love for the conference.

Good news

After lunch there is a medical retina session which is much more up my street. I might actually learn something that I can bring to my practice. Optimism reigns again and this time the auditorium is full.

PETE'S BOGUS JOURNEY



Peter and Tariq sing Club Tropicana at the Hula Hula karaoke bar.

Bad news

Once again, I am "Disappointed, once more, disillusioned, encore," as Neil Tennant sang with Electronic. The lectures are a collection of presentations on the latest clinical trial data and novel imaging techniques. There are a couple of interesting points in the two hours of talks but it is all so incredibly dry and not remotely engaging. It's more *Antiques Roadshow* than *Breaking Bad*. I had also hoped for something more didactic that would benefit my clinical practice.

The Q&A sessions after each talk are mildly entertaining though and contain the usual suspects, which include:

Audience member 1: "My question is designed to show that I am much cleverer than you and also make you feel slightly inadequate" [3].

Audience member 2: "My comment is mutually beneficial, of minor relevance and makes us both look good, almost as if it has been planted."

Audience member 3: "My question was answered in one of your PowerPoint slides but I clearly wasn't listening and everyone in the auditorium is now utterly baffled by my question."

It's not like the blood sport interrogation of Postgraduate teaching from 25 years ago though, which really was the modern-day equivalent of throwing slaves to the lions.

Good news

At last, my poster session comes around and amazingly I have not managed to mislay the poster at any stage on the

journey here. I like to think that the audit I have carried out is clinically relevant and may be interesting to fellow colleagues. I pin the poster up full of hope and expectation of the interesting discussions and dialogue it will generate.

Bad news

Imaginary tumbleweed starts to blow past me and my poster as I stand forlornly waiting for someone or indeed anyone to ask me about my paper and the research that we conducted. After an hour and a half of standing, my legs start to feel really tired, and I worry if it is because I am just getting old or like any hypochondriac, if it represents something more sinister such as a rare malignancy. The two-hour session ends but strangely none of the presenters leave. I then realise it is now the 'all-poster session' and everyone is required to stand by their posters for yet another two hours. "You cannot be serious!" as John McEnroe would say. After another hour of standing around I disappear, contemplating the whole effort vs. reward matrix for clinical research. I'm still not feeling the love.

Good news

The evening finally comes around and a group of us head out to a karaoke bar. As planned, Tariq and I take to the stage for our planned duet performance of *Club Tropicana* by Wham. As we stand there jiving to the music and singing the

line, "Let me take you to the place, where membership's a smiling face, brush shoulders with the stars," I realise that this is it. This is the value of the scientific conference. It is meeting up with old friends that we trained with who have now scattered around the planet and getting the chance to share special moments like this. Right here, right now, I feel a wave of happiness that is so complete. I am finally feeling the love for the conference!

Bad News

All good things must come to an end and I must head for home to pay the hidden tax on any clinician's leave which includes the overflowing email inbox, the piles of notes and letters on the desk and the inevitably overbooked clinics.

Good News

Tariq and I plan to perform *Pass the Dutchie* by Musical Youth at the next meeting. We are still negotiating who gets to sing the opening line "This generation, rules the nation, with version".

References

1. The *Krypton Factor* (1977–1995) was a popular British TV gameshow involving contestants competing in physical and intellectual tasks, which were more challenging than the average gameshow. The term 'Krypton Factor' entered popular parlance as something difficult, alongside the phrase 'rocket science'. For example, as a student many moons ago, when I was struggling to name an exhaustive list of causes of chest pain, the consultant said, "Come on Cackett, it's not the *Krypton Factor*." The hotel shower mechanism is another intellectual challenge made doubly difficult first thing in the morning when drowsy with jet lag.
2. I have subsequently learnt that CRISPR is an acronym for Clustered Regularly Interspace Short Palindromic Repeats. I'm still none the wiser, but apparently it is a gene editing tool that according to *New Scientist* will likely change the world. Hopefully that's in a good way and not in a crazy mad scientist *Bond* villain genetically modified bioweapon pandemic kind of way.
3. For some reason, Audience Member 1 always conjures up memories of the taunting Frenchman in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975): "Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries."

SECTION EDITOR



Peter Cackett,

Medical Retina Consultant, Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion, Edinburgh, UK.

pdcackett@hotmail.com