

Great congress moments

James Drife

My next visit to South Africa is now just a few weeks away. The O&G circus is coming to town and I shall be one of the thousands of delegates attending the XIX FIGO World Congress. Like FIGO, I'm comfortable with Roman numerals, but a 19th congress, like a 19th hole at golf, is one more than I bargained for. When I retired from practice earlier this year, I promised myself a life of wine and daytime television – but it was not to be. Silver-tongued emails from the Scientific Convener, plus the prospect of seeing Cape Town again, have proved irresistible.

These huge meetings are like major sporting events – you want to be there, even if it means standing at the back and peering over someone's shoulder. Last week my son sent me a text saying he was watching 'Freddie' Flintoff bowling in his last-ever test series. I like to think it was the presence of Drife Junior that brought England luck and their first Ashes victory at Lord's in 75 years. The evening before, in my native Ayrshire, Tom Watson had walked onto the 18th green at Turnberry to face the putt that would have made him the oldest Open champion in history. Could I have stood the tension if I had been in the crowd? Sadly, I'll never know.

International medical conferences may not provide quite the same level of heart-stopping excitement, but I'm not going to let that or my unreliable memory inhibit me from reminiscing about great congresses of the past. My first? Let me see ... I think it was 1974, when the UK Medical Research Council decided that its rawest recruits would be inspired by listening to Nobel prizewinners. We were given second-class rail tickets to a town somewhere in Germany, where I had my first experience of the Standard Plenary Lecture. This consists of an opening joke, a couple of nice easy slides, and then a sudden change of gear as the speaker moves into a world of Byzantine scientific complexity where only he and his PhD students feel at home. My awe turned to irritation and I came back inspired, not by beautiful minds but by gorgeous Bavarian scenery.

My worst congress moment? It has to be the time I allowed myself to be empanelled for a 'Meet the Experts' session in Canada's Rocky Mountains. I've never regarded myself as an expert on anything – I was a broad-brush sort of academic who relied on the registrars to sort out matters of detail. Not only that but, on this particular occasion, I arrived very late at night,

having gravely miscalculated the effects of jet-lag. (There's an eight-hour time difference between Leeds and the nearest Rocky.) I still remember the shock when my bedside phone rang to say the breakfast session had already started, and I recall even more clearly the face of the man who asked the first question. A colleague who really was an expert (albeit in something completely different) suavely took over as I tried to resuscitate myself with cornflakes.

Congress highs and lows can occur in quick succession. On my first trip to the mystic east, I was overwhelmed by Asian sights and smells and by the fact that the hotel bar was in – actually *in* – the swimming pool. Dear old England had nothing like this. Unfortunately, the local insects took to me in a big way and began a feast (Hey guys – roast beef flavour!), starting at my ankles and heading upwards. My cutaneous reaction was the stuff of horror movies and what I remember from that conference are the faces of lady delegates as I strolled around in shorts. Since then it's been business suits only, even on the beach.

The peak of my congress career was when I got to wear a big rosette as chairman when the British Congress came to Yorkshire in 1998. Oddly enough, this coincided with a memorable (or rather, forgettable) sporting moment, as England played Argentina for a place in the quarter-final of the football World Cup immediately after our opening ceremony. The Congress was briskly declared open, the royal platform party shot back to their limousines and the audience rushed into the exhibition hall, where pharmaceutical representatives had retuned their television screens to show the match. It was horrible. Our star player was sent off and we lost the penalty shoot-out. Oh well, at least that meant no distractions from the plenary lectures – which, I'm happy to say, were better than in Bavaria.

P.S.: Sorry for mentioning 'World Cup' so soon after the news that the 2015 Rugby Tournament will be held in England, not South Africa. Too soon after your 1995 triumph, perhaps. And the Webb Ellis Trophy deserves a trip home, however brief.

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