

Congresses remind us ...



Congresses remind us that we are part of a community of practice.

As gynaecologists we are dedicated to the common goal of providing a service to women. This service commitment is a large tent. It encompasses the academics and the clinicians, the teachers and the researchers, the administrators and the innovators.

It also incorporates those who plan, support and provide us with the tools of our trade and those who work for the rights, status and equality of women and our profession. We define ourselves by creating groups that champion legal and moral causes, that set standards of practice and behaviour which encourage us to find out more, deal with injustices or share our experiences of dealing with patients.

Congresses remind us how wide our specialty has become.

We all have our niches. The easily defined subspecialties of Maternal and Fetal Medicine, Reproductive Medicine, Gynaecological Oncology and Urogynaecology will inevitably be added to by other groups such as those with interests in ultrasound, the menopause, assisted reproduction, minimally invasive surgery, epidemiology, computer and information technology and medical education.

Very few of us are pure generalists, seeing patients across the entire spectrum of obstetrics and gynaecology. Our fields of interest soon become our areas of expertise and excellence. We are lucky that we can change our professional paths with maturity, develop new skills as the technologies evolve, offer our experience to younger colleagues, give opinions and advice to registrars, housemen and students.

Congresses remind us that we need to communicate with each other.

There is no substitute for personal contact. Nothing defines us more precisely than how we interact on a personal level. Only face to face can you judge and respond in a way that convinces you of the other's value. With the plethora of communication devices, we forget that you cannot assess someone's integrity by phone, e-mail, text, social network or website, no matter how sophisticated these have become. Our senses tell us more about a person in the first 10 seconds of meeting them than all the electronic wizardry yet invented.

We need unpredictability, sounds, smells, temperatures and surprises to colour our experience of people and places.

Congresses remind us that we are human and gregarious, and that fun matters.

We learn far better when we are enjoying ourselves. By observing or participating in situations, we engage in experiential learning, contextual learning and blended learning, which are the best ways of committing information to our neural pathways and making them available for recall.

Educational theory recognises attitude and prior knowledge as the cornerstones of memory. Attitude depends on motivation, which in turn is extrinsic or intrinsic. There is little extrinsic motivation riding on FIGO attendance. A couple of continuing professional development points, but hardly promotional kudos for coming to Cape Town. The intrinsic motivation is simple – what's in it for me? Pedagogy clearly shows that we are very selfish about what matters to us: how we feel, how we can improve for our benefit, how we get 'one up' on others, make more money, get discounts, find the best deal, satisfy our own goals and learn things that will give us the edge. Personal reward is the strongest driver – no matter how sophisticated we think we are. These things govern our intrinsic motivation, formulate our attitudes and dictate what we learn.

There are no straight lines in learning other than what matters to us. If it matters to us and we can see how we benefit, then we will learn. Of course, there are tricks to assist learning, such as associations and mnemonics, but repetition, explanations and examples do help. Grounded learning theory tells us that experience with a strong emotional component is the best means of learning. Apprenticeship teaches us the art of professionalism.

Congresses remind us that ours is a great specialty, alive and well, and that FIGO and Cape Town are well worth experiencing.

Athol Kent

Editor