

Risk of learning?

“ Anyone who has sat next to me at a scientific meeting or conference will know that I have a well-used, but not very well-developed, assessment tool for use at these events. It is not validated but seems reliable for a sole user and is repeatable. It takes into account both my expectations of the meeting and the reality of it.

Over the years, my risk of learning score has tended to be lowest for large national and international meetings and highest for meetings focused on a specific topic and for those aimed primarily at other specialties (the International Association for the Study of Pain, American Society of Clinical Oncology and the British Thoracic Society). I am a staunch advocate of lifelong learning. The low score does not reflect a view that I think that I know it all already, but relates to my perception that for years the same people gave (usually well-delivered) talks on the same topics, that very little changed from year to year and that submitted oral presentations and posters tended to be side-lined.

I have attended most of the EAPC congresses, with the most recent held in Aachen, Germany (8–10 April 2005). The theme was crossing boundaries. It seemed to me that more new information was imparted than at previous congresses and that there were more contributions from outside mainstream specialist palliative care. My risk of learning score was higher than at previous EAPC congresses.

Robert Twycross delivered the Floriani lecture on the topic ‘Death without suffering?’ He debated issues about how we interpret and communicate with people facing imminent death and argued that suffering is an inescapable part of death. Relief of distressing symptoms is often seen as our primary goal, but relieving physical symptoms can cause increased suffering, since patients no longer distracted or exhausted by pain or other symptoms may have greater opportunity to become distressed emotionally. Furthermore, for family and friends there is always suffering whatever the mode of death. Dr Twycross emphasised the vital importance of effective communication, including truthfulness and listening and urged us to ascertain the cause of our patients’

suffering. To me, learning is not just about acquiring new knowledge, but it is also about being prompted to think about things in a different way. I learnt from this lecture.

The nine plenary lectures were well chosen and covered a range of different aspects. It was refreshing that they all related to the theme of the conference. Boundaries challenged included those between palliative care for people with cancer and those with diseases other than cancer, between volunteers and paid staff, and between countries and cultures.

David Kissane drew on his work about family-focused grief therapy and recent systematic reviews, and made a strong argument that bereavement care will be most beneficial when targeted at those at risk of morbid bereavement outcome. The concept was not new to me, but the evidence supporting it was.

The need of the very medical bit of my brain to learn was satisfied by the sessions on anorexia and cachexia, by information about pharmacogenetics, the differential effects of opioids on the immune system and the effects of both chronic inflammation and opioids on the hypothalamic–pituitary axis. In the lecture about biology and pharmacology of the elderly, the audience was urged to remember the importance of pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics in clinical decision-making.

The ‘crossing boundaries’ theme was reflected in many oral presentations and posters, including those about palliative care in the intensive care unit, improving pain assessment in Dutch nursing homes and using creative therapies to support staff working in specialist palliative care. The standard was high and there were ample opportunities to learn.

Space doesn’t allow a full review of the conference in this commentary. Suffice it to say that I talked to many delegates and speakers and most thought that they had learnt at least something. Of course, further validation of my risk of learning tool will require my attendance at the 4th Research Forum of the EAPC (Venice 25–27 May 2006) and the 10th Congress of the EAPC (Budapest 6–9 June 2007)! See you there.

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