

## Has COVID-19 Ushered in a New Normal for Medical Meetings?

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It was just over one year ago that the COVID-19 pandemic hit, forcing many medical associations to postpone annual conferences and other medical meetings, hoping that they could be held later in the year.

Clearly, that did not happen for most. Still, wherever possible, conferences and educational events went virtual, sending both associations and manufacturers scrambling to adapt their content.

So, the question arises: are virtual and hybrid meetings the new normal?

"We don't yet have a new normal and we aren't yet meeting in person," says Alan Packard, PhD, president of Society of Nuclear Medicine and Molecular Imaging (SNMMI) director of the Radiopharmaceutical Research Laboratory at Boston Children's Hospital, and associate professor of radiology at Harvard Medical School. "Next year may be something different still, but we are planning an outstanding virtual meeting for this year."

SNMMI holds its annual meeting each year in June. In 2020, in spite of a short timeline for the change in format, the society was able to provide an innovative and successful virtual experience to 9,000 attendees from around the world. With ample time to plan, Dr

Packard says, the 2021 virtual meeting will be even better, with a variety of high-quality content and networking opportunities. The 2021 meeting will be more comprehensive and will include five concurrent sessions as well as categorical seminars and satellite symposia.

"More business meetings will take place virtually, but it won't replace live meetings," says Blake A Johnson, MD, FACR, medical director of the Center for Diagnostic Imaging who has chaired several CME meetings over the past year. "The virtual concept will remain in a hybrid fashion," Added Dr Johnson, who is also a member of the *Applied Radiology* Editorial Advisory Board.

In December 2020, Dr Johnson chaired the neuro section for the World Class CME (Charlotte, North Carolina) conference in Orlando. He was also the conference chairman for Educational Symposia's (ESI, Tampa, Florida) annual Neuroradiology in Clinical Practice meeting held in Scottsdale.

Both World Class CME and ESI provide continuing medical education in radiology and other specialties. They cater primarily to US-based attendees; therefore, neither organization was significantly impacted by international travel restrictions. On the other hand, Global Radiology CME, an international CME organization, rescheduled all of its

international conferences to 2022 due to intercountry travel restrictions.

From medical imaging societies and associations to CME providers, the virtual format still enables radiologists and aligned professionals to obtain their necessary continuing education.

Still, live meetings do more than only deliver didactic lectures and education.

"A big part of any event is the off-line conversations, networking, and sharing experiences," Dr Johnson says. "That just doesn't occur with a virtual meeting."

RSNA also switched to a virtual meeting in 2020 but is actively planning to bring back its in-person event—always held at Chicago's McCormick Place—this year. However, plans are underway to complement the live event with a virtual meeting component to ensure participation for anyone unable to make the trip, says RSNA Executive Director, Mark G Watson.

"Adaptability is key," Watson says. "We must take into account all possibilities and be prepared to make adjustments as the environment evolves and new considerations emerge."

While Watson anticipates some travel restrictions will be lifted as COVID-19 vaccinations expand, the association is considering all possibilities. Part of the organization's planning includes a robust virtual environment offering

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100% of eligible meeting content. He adds that both members and exhibitors have expressed their desire to return to a physical meeting.

### Pivoting in Response to COVID-19

Once COVID began shutting down businesses and social events, it became obvious to Heidi Wilson, president of World Class CME, that all of the company's meetings would be impacted.

"It was a very quick realization that everything we planned had to be cancelled or modified," Wilson says. She said she contacted hotels as it became apparent that meeting space contracts couldn't be honored and that all agreed to modify their agreements. World Class CME subsequently switched most of its meetings online and had to cancel just a few.

After the success of the National Basketball Association playoffs, which were played in a bubble at Walt Disney World in Orlando, FL, Wilson was encouraged that live meetings could still be held during the pandemic with the right safety precautions in place. World Class CME held its National Diagnostic Imaging Symposium in

December 2020 at Disney's Yacht Club Resort for a much smaller than usual live audience, with most faculty participating remotely.

"Disney is one of the best operators to guarantee safety," she adds. "They handled all the safety protocols, from masking to social distancing to food service. Everyone who wanted to come was able to."

Pivoting to virtual meetings took many hours of planning, Wilson says, and they often had to adapt as they went through the process.

"Virtual is better suited for shorter meetings, and we've taped short webinars with partners who had a need for CME on a certain topic," Wilson says. "Even before COVID, there were some physicians who preferred to only get online, and others who much preferred live meetings. However, it is hard to watch a screen for eight hours or for several days."

ESI had planned for up to nine meetings from March to June, and scheduled another eight for the fall of 2020. Stephen Hunter, the organization's CEO, said the company always sought to hold the meetings in-person if possible and practical;

however, switching to virtual meetings did not require a Herculean effort.

"ESI was in a fortunate position in that for the last six years, we had been webcasting live, so we already had a virtual component to [the meetings]," Hunter says. Prior to COVID, approximately 20 percent of participants attended virtually. Although an infrastructure was in place for streaming courses online, significant time and effort were required to deliver the faculty's lectures virtually.

"If we didn't have that infrastructure in place, it would have been difficult to pull the meetings as quickly as we did," Hunter adds.

In the fall of 2020, ESI held half of its scheduled meetings in person – two in Las Vegas and two in Arizona. The organization decided it would hold the meetings live as long as more than 25 people registered and local health or travel restrictions did not preclude in-person gatherings.

Both Hunter and Wilson said the hotels put safety precautions in place. Buffets were eliminated and all food was prepackaged. Separate entrance and exit doors were designated to help

with social distancing and to keep people moving in the same direction. Contactless check-ins, disposable menus, temperature checks, and limits on the number of people in confined spaces, such as elevators, became the new norm.

“The pandemic has changed many aspects of society and culture,” says Watson. “I expect that associations, along with the event and hospitality industries, will collaborate with health officials to design the safest possible meeting environments for the future.”

RSNA provides online learning opportunities all year, and Watson says that RSNA 2021 will offer an array of virtual CME opportunities just as the 2020 meeting did. “It’s important to offer our members the education they need in a variety of ways.”

According to Dr Packard, feedback on the 2020 virtual SNMMI Annual Meeting was positive. Attendees appreciated being able to watch presentations live or on-demand. The virtual format also provided additional opportunities for interaction through chats and questions posted for the presenter. Archived sessions were set to be available for one year so attendees can watch them at their convenience.

This year’s conference, Dr Packard says, will have a broad mix of live and recorded sessions offering education and the latest research. The virtual exhibit hall will be enriched with videos and chat capabilities. “It is hard to replicate an exhibitor’s booth in the virtual world,” says Dr Packard, “but our virtual exhibit hall will offer attendees the opportunity to see the latest technical innovations in our field.”

Networking opportunities will be enhanced with “Drink and Think” and social sessions, and plenary speakers will be announced soon.

“We all miss the personal interaction,” says Dr Packard, “but this year’s virtual meeting will provide a unique educational experience for nuclear medicine professionals all over the world.”

## Moving forward

Looking ahead, Hunter expects to see greater demand for in-person meetings.

“I suspect once the majority of the US is vaccinated, the pent-up demand to travel will be enormous,” he says. “Some of these meetings might hit record attendance.”

At the winter 2021 meetings held by ESI, several faculty members said it was the first trip they took in a year.

Hunter says he cannot remember a time when people were so happy to be at the meeting. “They were so thankful we had a live meeting, as were the hotels. They thanked us profusely, as some staff hadn’t worked in months.”

For 30 years, ESI has kept attendance data and mapped patterns, and Hunter says attending in person or virtually has always been a matter of personal preference.

“Even before COVID, there were physicians who would rather go online, whether broadcast live or taped, for their CME courses,” Wilson says. “So there has always been a choice and I’m optimistic that in time they will have that choice again to attend either virtually or in person.”

Dr Johnson is confident that the events of this past year will result in more concepts that embrace the ability to network virtually. In his opinion, social virtual events, such as family Zoom meetings, are a new norm.

He adds, “The pandemic served as a catalyst for greater acceptance of virtual platforms. Now that virtual meetings are no longer an outlier, we’ll continue to see development of mainstream options for conducting meetings, business, or even meeting with your doctor virtually.”