

Wish you were here: the great conference scam



*peter mcdermott
pure and uncut*

THE 2003 conference season has started and those whose posts have a decent training budget will be looking forward to their annual holiday on the firm. I see it as a holiday paid for with money intended for services for drug users, but I know that my puritanical streak can be a problem.

Now, I have to own up to a degree of hypocrisy. Like many of you, I have also taken the queen's shilling.

I've flown all the way around the world at the taxpayers expense, to stay in a luxury hotel and listen to pompous, self-important people waffle on about their wonderful new insights into the problems of drug use and drug dependence. Who wouldn't enjoy an all expenses paid luxury trip to Australia, the USA, India or Thailand? But sweet as this particular apple may be, every time I take a bite, I find myself staring at half a worm.

My own sense of disenchantment with the international conference scene first occurred at an event in Rotterdam. Yes, I was there on a freebie. But I noticed service users who had been attending the conference were outside the conference dinner begging for spare change. They didn't have the sort of money it takes to hang out in a posh hotel for five days.

As the waiter served the first course of jugged hare, it occurred to me that there was something obscene about holding a £50-a-head conference dinner - more than some of those attending had to live on for a week. I began to find myself stricken with a terrible bout of nausea, and it wasn't the jugged hare.

There really has to be a better way of sharing information than sitting in a conference break-out room and listening to somebody pontificate. The internet should have made all of that redundant.

We can publish our papers on the web, and do our networking on mailing lists. In those forums, people are judged on the quality of their argument, not on their professional status. Of course, that may be one reason why we haven't seen a swifter

move to virtual events.

But the arguments do seem to make sense. I can read a conference paper much faster than I can listen to somebody read it to me.

And while people make the argument that conferences give you the opportunity to discuss the ideas with the author of the paper, the truth is, you rarely get more than a few minutes for questions afterwards. And most delegates are unlikely to have the opportunity to sit down later with the stars of the conference circuit.

And so inevitably, you'll go to those sessions where the presenter has a point of view that you agree with, and then afterwards you'll hang out with your pals at the bar, getting gradually shit-faced and hoping that this year you'll really make the most of this learning opportunity and get lucky with a member of the opposite sex.

The autocratic and exclusive style of drug service management and its inability to

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enthusiasm, motivate and engender passion for the work at hand means that the competence of managers is increasingly being called into question.

One of the ways in which drug service managers can make some forward movement on this issue is to stop availing themselves of these pointless junkets and spend the money subscribing to journals, building a cutting-edge library and making ongoing learning an integral part of the workplace culture.

But if you can't manage that, then the least you can do is to share some of the booty around a little bit more equitably, and let those on the lowest salaries take advantage of the freebies from time to time.

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