PMG2016 – and why trainees should attend conferences

Attending conferences and meetings is something that isn’t a routine part of most training schemes, and it’s easy for a keen trainee to let it fall by the wayside – this is my argument for why you shouldn’t! As a trainee clinical scientist in clinical engineering, I almost did, but my supervisors (always looking for ways to get me out of their hair...) wisely suggested that I apply for the Postural Mobility Group conference bursary, and so – having successfully attended – I have some experience with which to explain why not to write off conference attendance as a trainee (of any discipline).

PMG is a large conference, and 2016 saw several hundred scientists, engineers, and other assorted professionals descend like a marauding horde on an entire floor of the International Convention Centre in Birmingham – I found watching presentations to an audience this size is quite an experience in itself, having never been to a large, national conference before. Lectures ranged from; the legal side of capacity and consent to using 3D printing in rehab services, via “a beginner’s guide to critical appraisal” and “integrating wheelchairs with other assistive technology”. The scientific content focussed on projects that might impact practice in future (and, as trainees, there’s a lot of professional future that it could affect!).

Although I probably should tell you that my favourite part of the meeting was some gleaned knowledge or inspiring wisdom, actually I particularly enjoyed trying out a two-wheeled powered wheelchair, based on the technology of the Segway. If your first and last thought every day is that wheelchairs have too many wheels (everyone thinks that, right?), I would recommend trying it out.

Here are some hesitations that I had over going to a conference as a trainee, and reasons that you should still consider it:-

*I won’t understand anything.* – This is actually a good reason to go: you have more to learn than other attendees might do. You can always look up something you don’t understand, or ask the presenter afterwards. In my limited experience, sessions in general conferences tend to be more easily understood than specialist ones, due to the different audience.

*But I won’t know anyone!* – One of the main selling points for attending conferences is meeting professionals from other areas, especially if you can find someone from the speaker or delegates list that you want to meet. There was never a better reason to casually stalk someone.

*That conference costs more than my shoes/car/house*. – Several conferences have bursary schemes for early-career professionals, so look around. Every department has a staff development fund, however well hidden it is; also companies have been known to sponsor delegates who approach them. In these cases, it helps if you can make a business case for attendance in terms of skills. Alternatively, you could always sell a kidney.

Essentially, although it can be challenging to fit conference attendance into a busy training schedule, it’s another way to learn and so well worth considering.