Orthopaedic information – a superglut?

Two remarkable decisions were made in Hong Kong in May 1995. The first was that two established and financially viable organisations, the International Arthroscopy Association (IAA) and the International Society of the Knee (ISK), resolved to vote themselves out of existence and to form a new organisation ISAKOS (International Society of Arthroscopy, Knee Surgery and Sports Medicine). The second was that the Presidents of associations with similar interests in Europe, North America and the Western Pacific decided to establish an informal group, the aim of which was to co-ordinate the plethora of international meetings on their respective subjects. Such international conventions are expensive to organise and to attend, but they seem to increase in number every year (see pages 171-2 of this issue). There must be a limit to the number of people who can fish the same stream; and to the load taken on by the conference-fatigued officers of each association. Their practices suffer a little more with every trip to the airport.

Do international meetings serve any useful academic purpose? Why do surgeons travel around the world to listen to papers which they have often heard before, some of which have already been published, and which are presented to very similar audiences in different lecture halls? If they wished only to hear the lectures, this could be arranged by satellite. A specialist conference, as a means of communication, is more labour-intensive, more expensive and less efficient than any journal. Often, the papers have been selected on the quality of an abstract which bears little resemblance to the final product: the creative writing of abstracts is fast becoming an art form. If a revised book of abstracts is supplied there is no need to listen to the papers.

The attraction of international meetings lies elsewhere. Where else can one meet so many colleagues from other countries, discuss old and new ideas, handle new instruments, cross cultural divides and see the great and the good bedecked in rosettes and ribbons? International meetings and journals serve very different purposes; both are important. The concept of such meetings is sound, but their number must be questioned.

National meetings, such as those of the British Orthopaedic Association, have more to offer. Surgeons in training can meet their future colleagues and learn by presenting their first major papers. Established surgeons can renew old acquaintances and specialty groups can meet separately to discuss their particular interests. National meetings help to hold the orthopaedic community together and allow it to unite on common and important issues. On a smaller scale, local or departmental meetings have an immediate relevance to clinical practice and are fundamental both to teaching and the smooth running of an orthopaedic service.

There is, of course, also a surfeit of other national meetings which an orthopaedic surgeon with a special interest may attend. More general meetings such as, in the UK, those of the British Medical Association, the Royal Colleges, and the Royal Society of Medicine deserve attention and there are many instructional courses. These meetings tend to be held in the popular periods between March and June or between September and November. The realities of clinical practice, however, are incompatible with...
attendance at more than a few of them.

And then there are the journals. A paper appearing in a peer-reviewed international publication confers respectability, perhaps even a touch of immortality. It makes information available to the widest possible audience, yet a specialised surgeon is able to read less and less of each issue. Journals will never be the fastest means of disseminating information, even although the number of new publications appears to be increasing exponentially. Electronic media like CD-ROM and E-mail may offer a faster, more relevant exchange of ideas, and there are already journals which exist only on the Internet. We may soon be able to download information on our own particular interest and consign ecologically unsound paper-based journals to history.

The publication delay of journals may seem far removed from the notion that we should reduce the scourge of international conventions, but they are related. Information technology, like air travel, is making communication so much easier that it is nearly impossible to keep pace with the flood of information being generated.

Solutions must be found, but whatever these may be, orthopaedic surgeons at present rely upon peer-reviewed journals of general and specialist orthopaedics to bring valid comment and news to their doormat. Unless, of course, they have already heard the papers in some exotic resort during a dreary international meeting.

D. J. DANDY