



# Poster presentations: Valuing all forms of evidence

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## KEYWORDS

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**Summary** This paper aims to assist readers who are considering submitting a poster presentation to a conference to appreciate their true worth and demonstrate the important contribution they can make to nursing scholarship and secondly, to provide new insights to conference reviewers who have the task of selecting appropriate contributions for conferences. The author will argue that the use of poster presentations is an ideal opportunity to disseminate research findings and clinical innovations. It offers a new, interesting, and thought-provoking perspective on poster presentations, which includes appraisal of extant literature and reflections about the significance of poster presentations to nursing scholarship. It highlights the benefits of submitting a poster presentation and concludes with some key points for conference reviewers to consider when deciding to select the suitability of abstracts for poster presentations or concurrent sessions.

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## Introduction

The dissemination of effective clinical innovations and research findings is the key to the growth and development of the nursing profession (Weaver Moore et al., 2001). Many avenues are open that enable authors to publish their work but choosing the right path poses a dilemma for many. Dissemination needs to be carefully considered at the design stage of research, in particular the source, the message, the medium and the target groups

(Scullion, 2002). It tends to occur through two primary mediums; journals and conference presentations (Nemich, 2000), with the latter the most frequently selected. Poster presentations are a very effective method of communicating research findings and provide the opportunity to meet with other researchers. Thus, they play a key role in research dissemination (Beyea and Nicoll, 1998). However, poster presentations are frequently considered less prestigious, lower ranked research, or 'failed presentations' (Rawlins, 2004, p. 282). This paper will aim to explore the contribution poster presentations can make to nursing scholarship through dissemination of knowledge and provide valuable insights to conference reviewers who have the task of selecting appropriate

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abstracts for conferences and members of the nursing community who are contemplating submitting a poster for a conference. The focus of this paper is on poster presentations for nursing conferences.

## Background

The use of conferences as a method of dissemination escalates each year. DeMarco et al. (2005) argue that a conference forum provides an excellent opportunity for professional growth as valuable research, practice and service work is shared with each other. Many international conferences offer various means of disseminating evidence and include concurrent sessions, symposia, workshops, seminars, round tables, fringe meetings and poster presentations. However, that said, most conferences offer only two choices: concurrent sessions and poster presentations. Although both types of presentations provide a vital opportunity to get a message across, the core activity at many conferences is the presentation of concurrent papers. Conference organizers have to make choices about suitable abstracts; many papers submitted for concurrent sessions are accepted, rejected or given the option of a poster presentation.

A search of the literature from a number of health sciences databases from 1990–2006 revealed only three empirical studies relating to poster presentations. Horn et al. (1993) concerned with attendance rates between traditional and alternative staff development programs found that nurses were reluctant to attend short presentations and that the poster presentation format attracted (65%) of all possible participants. Weaver Moore et al. (2001) conducted a survey using a 20-item questionnaire on individuals who had experience with the process of preparing and presenting posters and this gleaned valuable insights into the benefits of submitting posters. Smith et al. (2004) concerned about the assessment methods associated with poster presentations randomly divided 31 posters into two sets; 14 participating neurologists were randomized into two groups with each participant assigned to assessing one poster set. They were asked to score one set quickly and the other in more detail. Findings showed correlations between the two assessments groups in presentation, message and star quality. However, differences were noted in their scores relating to the facts, originality or science contained in the poster presentations. Their results concluded that the visual aspects of a poster conveyed as high a value as the scientific value and having a detailed assess-

ment may avoid any bias in scoring posters. However, much of the published literature relates to the process of developing a poster (Sherbinski and Stroup, 1992; Cullus, 1995; Gray, 1995; Thomas, 1995; Beyea and Nicoll, 1998; Nemich, 2000; Woolsey, 2003), the utility of posters in different settings (Pelletier, 1993; Handron, 1994; Moule et al., 1998) and the benefits and limitations of poster presentations (Miracle and King, 1994). All of the evidence available in the literature supports the use of poster presentations in many ways but no empirical evidence could be located to support the value of concurrent papers or poster presentations as worthwhile endeavors.

## Concurrent paper or poster presentation?

Traditionally, abstracts submitted to conferences have been divided into main two categories: concurrent sessions (oral) and poster presentations (visual) and selected from a predetermined criteria outlined in the conference promotion literature. From reviewing conference abstracts and dialogue with colleagues and students, concurrent sessions are frequently the preferred mode of presentation; organized in association with key themes – education, research, management, practice development, primary care, mental health, learning disability, and quality assurance. Each concurrent session allows approximately 20 min per speaker, with five minutes at the end for open discussion. Conferences have been identified as more influential than print media in disseminating research (French, 1999) but they have their limitations. For example, DeMarco et al. (2005) suggest that many participants attending concurrent sessions are passive and fail to challenge assumptions or the content of presentations. Huberman (1990, p. 7) argues that ‘...a study to exert strong conceptual influence on practitioners, interactions between researchers and practitioners must occur.’ The lack of interaction could be a limitation to dissemination. Poster presentations offer a less threatening environment for interactions to occur.

One of the most rewarding aspects of presenting a poster is the ability to relate to others, that is, meeting other presenters, seeing other posters and talking to people who are interested in the topic (Weaver Moore et al., 2001). Although such discussions tend to be brief and informal it allows the contents to be dissected and discussed (Powell-Tuck et al., 2002). This interaction provides the opportunity for the dissemination of knowledge to

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