

Blog

Conference fees and accessibility: when doors are barred

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Blog

Abby Lippman, Scholar in Residence at *BioéthiqueOnline*; Professor Emerita in the Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Occupational Health at McGill University;

Bryn Williams-Jones, Editor-in-chief of *BioéthiqueOnline*; Professor and Director of the Bioethics Program, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health, Université de Montréal

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| Conflit d'intérêts | Conflicts of Interest |
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| <p>Abby Lippman avait espéré avoir un laissez-passer de presse à la SCB (demande rejetée pour des raisons financières). En signe de protestation au sujet des frais à PO, elle va peut-être décider de ne pas participer à un panel accepté pour présentation à cette conférence.</p> <p>Bryn Williams-Jones est membre du comité consultatif scientifique de l'SCB 2017 et n'a pas assisté à la SCB 2016 à Toronto en raison des coûts (il préférait soutenir 3 étudiants). Il a soulevé cette question des</p> | <p>Abby Lippman had hoped for a press pass to the CBS (application rejected for financial reasons) and who, in protest over the fees at PO, may decide not to take part in a panel accepted for presentation at that conference.</p> <p>Bryn Williams-Jones is on the 2017 CBS Scientific Advisory committee, didn't attend the 2016 CBS in Toronto because of the costs (he preferred to support 3 students in attending), and has raised the</p> |

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| coûts avec les organisateurs de la conférence et l'exécutif du SCB. | issue of cost with the conference organizers and the CBS Executive. |
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There is, for many of us, a serious problem and one that is increasingly likely to negatively affect all those with some interest in biomedicine, healthcare policy and practice, and bioethics. This problem is, in fact, an ethical issue since it's a problem of justice.

The problem arises when some conference, meeting or other gathering you wish to attend is not broadly accessible. This means it is not only unwelcoming for those with all kinds of physical abilities, but also unwelcoming for those with limited financial resources. The welcome mat is definitely not out when the cost of attending is disproportionately high and constitutes a financial barrier. And these exclusive events are becoming increasingly frequent.

These occasions have, over the years, often been the only times and places when we can meet friends who we see infrequently, or colleagues we only know online or from their published work. The usual gatherings are, among other things, privileged opportunities to share expertise face-to-face and even build new collaborations. And they are especially important for students and junior researchers who want to identify emerging research areas, test out potential supervisors, etc. But even when the event is in our hometown and we can thus avoid the expenses of travel or lodging, and we bring our own coffee or food to eat and thereby leave the lightest "footprints" possible, we are increasingly still barred from attending.

The purpose of writing here is not to whine but rather to sound an alarm. This is not only our problem, and we think that it is time, in fact that it is urgent, for others who may be excluded to speak up with us.

Two events, both planned for Quebec in the coming months, exemplify our concern. The 2017 Canadian Bioethics Society conference, *Falling Through the Cracks: Equity, Ethics and the Challenges of Vulnerability*, to be held May 24-26 in Montreal, has regular [registration fees](#) of more than CAD\$800 for non-members and \$250-285 for students (tax incl.). For its part, the 2017 Protecting Overdiagnosis conference, *Towards Responsible Global Solutions*, August 17-19 in Quebec City, has even higher [registration fees](#) with an "early bird" rate of £395 or almost CAD\$700. Both conferences are likely attractive to the same people. But how can anyone – without the support of the deep pockets of industry or other commercial groups – afford these costs? Even to attend just one of them? More to

the point, though: should scientific conferences such as the CBS and PO ever charge such high registration fees to students, community members, professionals who will be paying out of pocket, or even to college or university researchers working with ever shrinking research grants?

A local, attending only one of these two upcoming conferences would have to lay out more than \$1000; those living outside the host city who have to pay for their hotel and travel might be set back even further, with this perhaps representing a month's income for "precariate" workers in the field.

These two conferences, as with many others in the health sector, appear to be following the lead of the major bioscience and medical conferences: they schedule events at high-end downtown hotels in attractive tourist cities (e.g., Montreal and Quebec) to maximize participation. But this model is, in itself, very problematic: this breed of downtown, tourist-friendly conference often also has to be heavily subsidized by the pharmaceutical and device (or other relevant industry) sectors. This allows organizers to pay extravagant honoraria and fly in high profile conference presenters, and to provide lots of conference goodies (bags, gifts, etc.) for those visiting their glitzy display kiosks. And merely listing supporters in various categories (platinum to silver) is little assurance that the obvious conflicts of interest are in any way managed appropriately.

Yes, the CBS and the PO groups are underfunded, have their own financial problems, and so are seeking to organize quality events for their members as well as to generate revenue to keep functioning as organizations. But this "outsourcing" of financial problems in the form of elevated registration fees is as problematic as is outsourcing in other areas. Should not the problems of neoliberal austerity, about which CBS and PO members have likely protested loudly elsewhere, not also be questioned in the context of their own conferences?

More to the point, should not those of us who are members of these groups also question our own desire to have our annual events at high-end downtown hotels (to facilitate academic tourism), receive goodie bags, and be treated like royalty? Could we not instead, in the interest of encouraging greater access to and diversity of participants, hold our events on university campuses, negotiate institutional support, do away with the goodie bags and high-end hotels, and radically reduce costs? In so doing, we could make our gatherings much more accessible.

More and more, the doors of academic conferences are becoming locked, with fewer and fewer having the means to pay the registration costs that will open these barred entries. This is unlike the growing trend of researchers who are posting raw data and publishing in open access journals, thereby opening wide windows to knowledge. We now need to open the doors to academic conferences, and that means working for change, in solidarity and through both personal and collective action. Unless there is authentic accessibility, bioethicists and others working on health issues may need to do what those excluded from other high-profile festivals and events do and have our own "off" conferences... "off" the expensive lists but definitely "on" for what should happen when all can gather and exchange ideas.

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