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5 **ZOOMING OUT FROM VIRTUAL CONFERENCES**

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7 We'll meet again

8 Don't know where, don't know when

9 But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.

10 *Vera Lynn, 1939*

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12           These opening words from one of the most famous songs of the second world war era  
13 took on new resonance early in March 2020 when medical conferences began to be cancelled  
14 as global restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings were imposed because of the  
15 COVID-19 pandemic. In common with other organisations, the Society for Neuroscience in  
16 Anesthesiology and Critical Care (SNACC) by necessity moved its 2020 and 2021 annual  
17 meetings to virtual formats. While virtual conferencing has been widely embraced as an  
18 essential vehicle for scientific engagement during the pandemic, I suspect that, like me, many  
19 of you are now experiencing 'Zoom/Teams fatigue' as well as missing the opportunities to  
20 meet with friends and colleagues. Therefore, it is fitting that SNACC will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup>  
21 anniversary meeting at an in-person event in Seattle in September 2022.

22           As in-person conferences resume, it is timely to consider what we have learned during  
23 the last two years of enforced virtual conferences. Certainly, the pandemic has been a catalyst  
24 for flexibility and creativity. Virtual conferencing has been a success by any assessment,  
25 allowing continuation of knowledge exchange and scientific discussion despite the travel and  
26 other restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

27           The advantages of virtual conferences have been well-rehearsed in this journal  
28 previously [1]; one of their major benefits is removal of many of the traditional barriers to  
29 conference attendance. Virtual conferences are more cost-effective for organizers and  
30 attendees than in-person meetings and improve accessibility by avoiding the need for travel.  
31 The latter is particularly advantageous for those whose access to in-person conferences is  
32 limited because of personal circumstances or cost constraints. Virtual conferences have the  
33 potential to bring together a wider community than in-person meetings, increasing the  
34 diversity of both faculty and delegates, and removing important barriers to global scientific  
35 exchange. On the other hand, decisions to attend medical conferences are made for many  
36 reasons, not all which can be met by virtual events. Social networking, ad hoc discussions  
37 and resultant collaborations, and opportunities to meet old friends and make new ones cannot  
38 easily be replicated in a virtual format.

39           The detrimental effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on neuroscience research has been  
40 substantial, though mitigated to some extent by the ingenuity, creativity and perseverance of  
41 research communities [2]. Medical conferences have historically been the major vehicle for  
42 the presentation and dissemination of new research, and it is gratifying that abstract  
43 presentations at both the 2020 [3] and 2021 [4] virtual SNACC meetings were maintained at  
44 almost pre-pandemic levels. While on-line abstract sessions offered advantages in terms of  
45 accessibility, the loss of in-person oral and poster sessions removed key learning experiences  
46 and other opportunities for presenters. This has likely been most disadvantageous to trainees  
47 and junior faculty for whom conference presentations are key components of training and/or  
48 a requirement for progression. The value of being able to interact with a ‘live’ audience  
49 during Q&As, to receive immediate and in-person feedback from experts and, importantly, to  
50 be able to discuss work informally beyond one’s usual peer group cannot be overestimated.  
51 Networking, which is so crucial to junior researchers for mentorship and collaboration, is also

52 difficult or impossible in a virtual setting. A return to in-person abstract presentations, or  
53 hybrid formats that allow a choice of in-person or online presentation/attendance depending  
54 on personal preferences, should be a key goal for conference organisers in the new era.

55 It is important that the benefits of virtual conferences are not lost as in-person  
56 meetings resume. Professional organizations, including SNACC, should consider making all  
57 conference presentations accessible online for those who cannot attend in-person and for  
58 subsequent review by all attendees. Some sessions lend themselves easily to virtual access,  
59 whereas others, such as ‘hands-on’ workshops (often the sessions most highly rated by  
60 attendees) require in-person attendance. Hybrid conference models with choice of in-person  
61 or virtual participation will likely become the norm, though optimal formats remain in  
62 evolution.

63 As SNACC and other professional societies begin the uncertain journey towards new  
64 annual meeting formats, one thing is now certain. Unlike Dame Vera Lynn, we do know  
65 where we will meet again, and when – at the SNACC meeting in Seattle, September 8-10,  
66 2022.

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71 *The author has no conflicts of interest to declare*

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