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Preserving dignity and anonymity at scientific conferences

Numerous guidelines frame the proper conduct and reporting of medical research. The Helsinki Declaration¹ exists to safeguard the health, safety, autonomy, and privacy of research participants. Other guidelines define how research should be reported in scientific journals.² However, these norms are not applied equally to other forms of scientific reporting, such as conference presentations. Particularly worrying is an increasing trend in the use of photographic images that we believe violate patients' trust and privacy. At a recent, major international conference, for example, we witnessed gratuitous use of photographs of refugees and patients affected by Ebola or Zika in purportedly scientific presentations. Most of these photographic images were not directly relevant to the scientific content of the presentation, but appeared to be aimed at eliciting an emotional response or connecting with the audience. In no instance was it clear whether the photographs were taken and used with the subjects' consent.

Researchers should show restraint, respect, and empathy when using identifying images in scientific presentations. Such photographs, often involving vulnerable groups, are taken by researchers and medical response teams from a position of power; individuals, particularly children, who are in unfortunate situations not by choice might have limited agency to give consent. Such circumstances, however, do not waive an individual's right to choose how their images are used, nor does it absolve researchers from the responsibility of using images fairly, appropriately, and tastefully. Context is important. An image depicting conditions within a refugee camp might be relevant in a presentation

describing challenges to health-care delivery in this setting. In contrast, an image of a child refugee is not relevant in a talk about variation in antibiotic-resistance genes among migrant populations. Unfortunately, recent infectious-disease emergencies and the increasing importance of migrant health appear to have given researchers licence to use images of affected individuals to promote the global importance of their work, raise their caché among their peers, and give an air of exoticism to their presentations. We consider this an outrageous breach of individuals' dignity that promulgates harmful stereotypes about vulnerable populations in low-resource settings. Most researchers would find similar portrayals of minors affected by outbreaks in high-income settings unacceptable. Rather, the value of one's work should be evident from its scientific merit and demonstrable impact.

Current guidance on scientific publication cautions researchers about the appropriate use of images, including respecting patients' rights to privacy and anonymity, and the need for informed consent if these cannot be guaranteed.² Conference organisers should, using existing ethics frameworks, develop similar guidelines for the appropriate use of images in presentations. Where there is doubt, identifying images should be avoided. Instead, the individual's own words, quoted with permission, can be equally effective, while giving individuals agency to describe their condition without being made into a spectacle.

We declare no competing interests.

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**Clarence C Tam, Vittoria Offeddu*
clarence.tam@nus.edu.sg

Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore, Tahir Foundation Building, Singapore 117549, Singapore (CCT, VO); and London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK (CCT)

- 1 World Medical Association. Declaration of Helsinki—ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. 2013. <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/> (accessed Nov 10, 2016).
- 2 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals. 2014. <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/> (accessed Nov 10, 2016).

