

# European Academy of Allergy/Clinical Immunology Annual Congress: View of a Senior Allergist

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The last annual meeting of the European Academy of Allergy/Clinical Immunology, which took place in Barcelona in June 2015, hosted some 8000 participants, 850 of them speakers. The theme of the congress was “Allergy: Old Questions, New Answers.” I, for one, had no issue with old questions such as asthma, atopic eczema, rhinitis, food, drug and insect venom, or contact allergies, but I was puzzled by some of the new answers ...

My bewilderment could possibly be attributed to several of the more modern nouns that would not be immediately recognized or understood without the help of our trusty friend, Google. One such instance is the term “exposome,” which combines exposure to the environment from pregnancy onwards with individual, genetic and epigenetic settings; together, these factors’ cumulative impact determines the overall status of our health. Another example that springs to mind is “Biobank,” which is a type of storage room for biological samples. Since the 1990s these banks have been providing essential research tools to medicine/biology.

Highlights of the meeting included a variety of plenary talks, symposia, pro and con sessions, workshops and poster sessions on new subjects such as “Shared genetic origins of allergy and autoimmune diseases” (J.E. Waage) – a lecture that challenged the old dogma about these two entities being allegedly mutually exclusive. Also notable was the provocative symposium, titled “The allergic march – does it exist?” in which Adnan Custovic presented a two-cohort, cross-sectional study of 9801 children of whom only a small percentage followed the classic allergic march of symptom development: atopic eczema-wheezy bronchitis-asthma/allergic rhinitis.

I cannot even begin to attempt to cover all, or even part of the vast volume of information to which we had all been exposed. Whoever is interested can go online for the latest developments in the field of allergy/clinical immunology. I would, however, like to share one aspect of the congress that was absolutely novel/experimental, and which I had the opportunity of watching “live.” I am referring to a new innovative technique of conducting workshops.

A standard workshop traditionally comprises 20 minute lectures followed by a brief Q&A or a handful of comments from the audience who, for the most part, maintain a predominantly passive role. The new approach, however, is all about making the

experience interactive; that is, presenting the subject in an accessible, actively engaging manner and with only a limited number of junior academy members in attendance. The audience in our case was spilt into groups of six-to-eight individuals who were seated around ten separate tables. It began with a 7 minute lecture by a well-known authority figure in the field, who then addressed short questions to the audience who gave instant answers by clicking on an electronic device. The answers appeared on the electronic screen as a percentage after 20 seconds.

After the lecture, the speaker proceeded to write a number of key questions on the electronic screen. The audience, divided into groups, was then allowed 2 minutes to discuss each question among themselves at their respective tables, formulate a concept and appoint a speaker from their table who would present the answer on the group’s behalf. Next, a microphone (embedded in soft cloth) was thrown randomly at one table whose representative then caught it and answered the question according to the consensus he and his teammates had reached. The same procedure occurred with each of the remaining questions. At the end, the chairman presented a summary and conclusion of the session.

For example, a session I attended was entitled, “How to publish?” in which one speaker asked the audience: “Would you rather publish in a high-impact journal or one that would get back to you quickly?” The audience preferred the former. Another speaker asked the following question: “When you begin working on a manuscript, do you first write down the results and take it from there, or do you rather start with an abstract, the methods, and so on?” The consensus showed a preference for writing down the results first and crafting the rest of the article around them.

All these experimental sessions were filmed. Perhaps, organizers of future academy congresses will watch the videos and may decide to embrace and adopt this new approach in lieu of the old ones. I liked it! After the congress wrapped up and I was heading home, I remembered the words of Mahatma Gandhi: “*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.*”

## Correspondence

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