A phenomenon often noted at conferences is the seeming unconsci
cousness or unresponsiveness of members of the audience. Interestingly
it is not typically the speaker that notes this finding but rather other members
of the audience. This may have something to do with the dulcet tones of someone
next to you snoring away that interrupts the otherwise efficient note-taking that
you are there for.

Lectures, it is said, are the means of transferring notes from the pages of the
speaker to the pages of the audience without going through the mind of
either. As such, sleeping during meet-

ings may not necessarily impede this process. The speaker can of course
don and on and on without as much as a break in the flow unaware of the
passing slumber of his audience.

Recent ground breaking research involved an analysis of this phenomenon at a 2 day internal medicine
lecture series.1 The three observers noted the occurrence of “nod-off episodes per
lecture” (NOELs) that happened in the audience during the lectures. Being
Canadians, they counted only one nod-off episode per listener colleague per
lecture—a fact that may underestimate the incidence of truly boring speakers.

Nodding off episodes were used rather than “sleeping” as the observers felt
that it may be too intrusive to check this process. The speaker can of course

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Having been at hundreds of sports medicine meetings over the past 20
years or so, I have witnessed this phenomenon over and over. In many
cases, I have been the NOEL-er. Rarely can I claim jet lag or a previous late
night drinking session as the basis of this (mea maxima culpa) but more
often than not it is the quality (or lack of quality) of the talk that induces this
 soporific state.

We emphasise to our sports medicine trainees the need to gain experience and confidence giving talks. Start with
something simple we say. Lectures to

other registrars, trainers, coaches, and
and undercounting of the NOELs may
have ensued.

There were some surprising findings. Lectures that should be intrinsically boring (obscure topics, few data, absent
analyses) had unexpectedly low NOEL rates. This was attributed to the bizarre-
ness of the presentation. Speaker factors such as stage wandering, raving, or
dropping the microphone also helped keep the physicians awake.

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Conference organizers sometimes send round some paperwork with some gen-
eral presentation advice when you submit an abstract. This probably gives
some detail. I wouldn’t know as I never read it. Straight in the wastepaper bin
has been my practice. Unless the information grabs my attention instantly
then it is lost in the morass of paper crossing my desk each day. If you want
to look at some clever AV work, go to the apple website (www.apple.com) and
look at the various online presentations from their CEO, Steve Jobs. He had to
invent the AV technology to keep up with his presentations! More impor-
tantly look at his slides—layout, inform-
ation, data—and appreciate a real
expert at work.

I am also continually frustrated by the fact that medical conference presenters are
designed to present a brief abstract (and standing on the podium for those
language nitpickers) with a fixed micro-
phone and a screen that is typically set
behind them forcing them to turn around and hence become invisible. Recently in Prague, we as the conference
organizers, had to physically restrain the set up crew from building a stage
and screen in the wrong place for our speakers. The set up crew were
briefed by the hotel conference management
team and were following instructions.
What became increasingly clear was the fact that the hotel manage-
ment team had never given any real
thought to the stage layout and speaker
requirements.

Some university departments and
larger sports medicine clinics suggest
practice talks before the real presenta-
tion. Helpful for one’s confidence and
timing but not necessarily a path to
presentation quality.

I have often thought that the best
talks are given by a person who has (a)
a detailed knowledge and experience of
the topic being presented, and (b) has
organised his or her thoughts on the
topic. This latter point cannot exist
without the initial understanding of
the problem. Furthermore someone
who studies a topic inside out often
is passionate about it. Passion and enthu-
siasm comes across to the audience very
clearly.

In the words of that new age guru,
Dame Edna Everage, colour and move-
ment is critical. Add knowledge, pas-
sion, and good slides, and you have the
full package.


REFERENCE

1 Rockwood K, Hogan D, Patterson C. Incidence of
and risk factors for nodding off at scientific
Yada Yada Yada or carpe somnum

P McCrory


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