Journal of Dairy Research

cambridge.org/dar

Editorial

Cite this article: Knight CH (2022). Virtually absent. *Journal of Dairy Research* **89**, 221. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022029922000462

Received: 4 July 2022
Accepted: 6 July 2022
First published online: 19 August 2022

Author for correspondence: Christopher H. Knight,
E-mail: chrisknight@breathescience.org

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hannah Dairy Research Foundation

Virtually absent

Christopher H. Knight

BreatheScience, Ayr KA7 2QW, UK

I recently attended Conferences in Edinburgh and Kansas City. Not surprising in itself, except that these meetings were taking place on the same few days in late June. The marvels of internet technology allowed me to present to an audience of mammary gland biologists in the USA on Monday and then to animal welfare scientists and veterinarians in Scotland less than 48 h later. There was a time when I might have enjoyed a long-haul transatlantic flight, but these days I would have preferred to have stayed in Scotland, even had I not accepted the Edinburgh invitation first. This Conference was organised by a commercial pharmaceutical firm and the invited audience came from across the globe, but all were present at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh meeting rooms to listen to a variety of extremely interesting presentations around the theme of 'Reconnecting humans with food producing animals'. The venue was excellent, as was the reception held in a well known whisky experience on Princes Street and then the dinner in what used to be the printhouse for a major Scottish newspaper, now a hotel and restaurant. I particularly enjoyed the latter, where I had the opportunity to talk to a young behavioural scientist, socially comparing experiences of Cambridge student life and, scientifically, being persuaded regarding the power of behavioural change as a means of improving lifestyles, efficiency and productivity. I gained a lot from this conversation and from the Conference in general, meeting old friends and colleagues and making new ones. My knowledge and experience were broadened and by direct interaction with the audience I came away feeling that I had contributed to what was, by common acclaim, a very successful meeting. And so to Kansas City. This was the Annual Meeting of the American Dairy Science Association, an august body that has been organising annual meetings for well over one hundred years. These are large meetings (I cannot say exactly how large) with many parallel sessions: at the time that I was presenting to the Lactation Biology Symposium on Nutrient Transport in the Mammary Gland there were another five sessions taking place simultaneously. Delegates attending at the venue would have been joined by very many additional delegates paticipating online, myself included. I was the first to present, having left my whisky cocktail temporarily to return to my hotel and go online. Blended meetings of this sort have become rather normal practice in the last couple of years, very largely as a consequence of the restrictions imposed by the Covid pandemic. I have organised several myself and they have been successful in their own way. As a means of enabling international top-ranking speakers to engage, virtually, with audiences brought together with limited funding to focus on well defined topics they could be said to offer a significant advance on what was possible a decade or so ago. There were four invited speakers in the ADSA Symposium, so it was with great regret that I listened to our organiser (a personal friend and colleague) introduce the program by announcing that two of these presentations would be given virtually, whilst the other two had been pre-recorded and the speaker would not be taking part in any way other than cinematographically. I had also been persuaded by ADSA to submit a video recording of my presentation ('just in case'), so I was well aware of the technical limitations that might affect presentation quality. More importantly, I had absolutely no desire to present to an audience that I had no opportunity of interacting with, and had the roles been reversed I would have felt exactly the same about listening to someone who was absent in most senses of the word. The presentation proceeded without hitches and there were questions (very good questions!) so I felt happy to have taken part, although I have to confess that I returned to my whisky as soon as I could decently do so. In subsequently thanking me for taking part, the organiser commented that '*the pre-recorded talks were really a pain*'. I cannot recall the exact occasion on which the two us first met, but it was many years ago and would almost certainly have been at an international meeting of some sort. It may well have been over the dinner table or drinks at the bar. The point is simple, but exceedingly important. Not withstanding the global participation opportunities offered by online participation, virtual and blended meetings will never offer the same potential for individual development, growth, learning and camaraderie as does real, live, face-to-face engagement. Without these things, the pace of scientific development will be, at best, slowed and, potentially, grind to a halt. Those of us who have been attending scientific conferences for years will know that all too well, but the message needs to get through loud and clear to the next generation of researchers. In particular, the concept of accepting pre-recorded presentations should be dropped forthwith, an obvious (to me) opportunity for behavioural change to achieve a really positive outcome. The value I have obtained over many years from meeting, in a real way, with fellow scientists is such that my desire to avoid long-haul travel would have been put to one side, and I would have followed in the footsteps of Wilbert Harrison, '*I'm going to Kansas City, Kansas City here I come* .