

## WHY WE NEED ZOOS

When choosing which conferences to attend, the small, focused symposia usually offer the most enticing prospects. But broader, bigger meetings can give opportunities for cross-fertilization that are of fundamental importance to the advancement of drug discovery.

We've all been there. Acres of poster boards, marathon treks between indistinguishable meeting rooms, no seats available once you get to the talk, no time for discussion, and absolutely nowhere to get a decent lunch. "So how was it?" colleagues ask on your return. "It was a zoo", you reply with feeling.

Without question, the big meetings are hard work. Given the choice between battling it out in New Orleans' Ernest N. Morial Convention Center with 15,000 other conventioners, or relaxing off-piste with some of the 400 registrants at a Keystone Symposium, surely only the foolhardy would opt to join the scrum. If your view of meetings is a reinvigorating few days away from the grind, sharing the latest ideas with a few choice colleagues, then the decision is clear. And most of the meetings that we all attend are like that (although without the skiing perhaps) — focused and small, and definitely an opportunity for reflection and crystal-ball gazing. But larger meetings, with a broader focus, have their own attributes.

Some of the big meetings in drug discovery are really marketing fairs. Although there will certainly be good science presented at this month's BIO 2002 in Toronto and August's Drug Discovery Technology World Congress in Boston, most will attend for the networking opportunities that these meetings present. But another kind of large meeting hopes to attract delegates through a rather different attribute of size — the ability to remain scientifically broad. A classic example is the FASEB meeting — that strangely old-fashioned assemblage of pharmacologists, immunologists, anatomists and others who gather under the banner of 'experimental biology' every spring. It is a fascinating meeting, but as disciplines throughout science become ever more fragmented, and the choices of topics for conferences consequently become narrower, scientific breadth becomes an increasingly difficult proposition to sell to scientists who are carefully weighing up where to invest their precious travel budget. Who has time for scientific breadth these days?

*Nature Reviews Drug Discovery* would argue that we all do. Those who have been reading this column or looking at our content during our first six months will know that we believe narrowness of focus to be a central problem plaguing that most interdisciplinary of entities — the drug discovery pipeline. Encouraging participants in the drug discovery and development process to step outside their own specific areas of expertise and chat with colleagues from down the hall is, we believe, one key step on the road to getting more drugs moving down the line. And for cross-fertilization of ideas to flourish, you have to get the idea generators to come to grips in the first place, so to speak.

So, the generalist meetings present great opportunities, and, undoubtedly, such meetings are still full of life. Chemists, for instance, flock in great numbers to the American Chemical Society meetings, and neuroscientists seem to be ever keener on the Society for Neuroscience Annual Meeting. But these days, the idea of meeting under a single, broad umbrella seems to sit more naturally with some of the diverse disciplines that constitute drug discovery than with others. Take pharmacologists, a group that in our book encompasses everyone studying the relationships between drugs and living systems. Next month sees the staging of the XIVth World Congress of Pharmacology in San Francisco, undoubtedly the best international forum for pharmacologists who are studying different systems to come together with the single aim of learning more about the way in which drugs work. It would seem to be a perfect venue for trading ideas, and of special relevance considering the concerns that we all share over the future health of drug pipelines. But registration numbers will be low, with a predicted attendance of 3,000 people. Given that this meeting happens only once every four years, it seems a shame to let the opportunity slip by. But perhaps the problem with zoos is that once you have been, you don't feel the need to go again for a while. You should.

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