

Editorial

You are Invited to be a Guest Speaker at a Conference “Ghost speakers and Beguiled Audiences”

Feeling proud and ready to pack your baggage based on an email invitation from a prestigious society calling you to deliver a guest lecture at an annual meet or to chair an entire session! Wake up, you are not alone and it's not a dream. It happens with many of us every day. If you feel that you haven't received one so far, then check for it in your junk/spam folder. Hidden agenda behind these swindle invitations can make you to permanently feel dejected, cheated and may leave your mouth with unpleasant taste forever. New York Times reported such an event and called it as a parallel world “pseudo-academia,” competing with prestigiously titled conferences and journals that sponsor them (1).

Traditionally, Science congresses are conducted by the societies with defined objectives in the selected field of interest. Financial support to propel these events is usually gained by registration fee, generous contributions from governmental agencies, philanthropic welfare societies and companies. Abstracts received are allowed to be presented in the conference only after the peer review process and session speakers are selected by the dedicated peer group in the organizing committee. Eminent researchers are invited or promoted to give lectures on various sessions are broadly classified into areas where the interest of sub-specialties are unified. Reaping profits were seldom the motive in organizing such conferences and surplus if any, has always been ploughed back for the welfare of the members of the society and to promote the field of interest. Finances are monitored by the elected representatives, the peer group, who are keen in the academics and not in filling up their pockets in the name of an academic event!

Young investigators are encouraged to attend these events where they get an opportunity to hear and meet their peers. They also get a chance to learn the art of science by attending the sessions discussing fascinating methodologies, intriguing interpretations and apt presentations in an interactive manner. I still remember the thrill of mine, when my first paper was selected for a presentation in an Annual Conference 25 years back. It was an opportunity for me to meet the icons of the field in close proximity. I strongly feel that my interactions with them helped me in nurturing skills, understanding the dimensions of research and to update my knowledge of the field. I still believe it to be my eye opener and path maker rather than calling it as a place for networking, as per the current trend.

After opening the gates of economic liberalization, the concept of global village started evidencing the entry of Academic conference industry. Economic interest of non-state actors who don't belong to any scientific societies of academic origin ventured into digital domain and made use of the academic accolade for a mere “bargain-counter”. Unlike the highlights about the loads of fraud emails hooking people for winning lotteries, the real crux of fraudulent conferences started coming to surface very late. Researchers realized very late about the flamboyantly worded letters like “We are very much aware of your quality of research and reputation”, “we admire your high reputation” from international conferences of their unabridged field work, selectively giving them a preferred title and a suitable track for invited lecture with discounted registration fee. The fee is accounted for giving the privilege of being a invited guest at a conference where all of the participants are almost invited. The young and desperate researchers are lured comfortably to enrich their CV. At times such conferences are cancelled with no refund of money (2).

The large open access outfit OMICS Publishing Group having its global headquarters at Hyderabad, publishing more than 250 online journals has been accused of having low editorial standards, raising suspicion over the practices used by the company in the selection of guest speakers to take part in its conference events (7). This company has come under fire for holding conferences that advertise about the internationally acclaimed scientists and institutions who never agreed to attend or participate in the conference (3).

Many times the invited guest lecture has to be delivered in an empty hall or in a hall which will only housed invited guest speakers, running all tracks together or sharing the hall with another parallel conference. The scientists feel robbed, purpose is forfeited and new scale of discrimination has appeared at times to ask the participants to take food according to the fee paid. The unexpected researcher will also be robbed through the hotel room rent in the name of conference. One such narration comes from Dr. Jim Sawitzke from National Cancer Institute who came to attend the meeting of Genetic Engineering 2013 organized by OMICS at a Hotel in North Carolina in 2013 (4).

An Australian Nobel laureate Professor Peter Doherty refused to be a part of 13th Asia Pacific Global Summit and Expo on Vaccines and Vaccination going to be held at Melbourne in 2016, after discovering about the controversial company (OMICS) accused of unethical and predatory conduct. In this conference, an incident has also appeared that a news reporter has been identified as a world class expert in immunology and even addressed as "Dr". This Hyderabad based company has also come under United State's NIH copyright infringement (1). In April 2013, the US Department of Health and human service issued a cease-and-desist letter to OMICS group for infringement and their journals have been removed from Pubmed Central (5).

Apart from this, phishing scams have also been reported by using the name of BIT life sciences especially for fraudulently collecting registration fees from credit cards up to \$2000. May 2016,

News Xpress⁵ exposed a story of a Professor of Management studies from a reputed university from Shillong, India has been offered waiver of all expenses paid free trip to US to attend a International Conference on Ending Extreme Poverty & Children's Rights In Education. The offer included, return air ticket, visa charges etc., provided he pays in EURO for 5 nights for stay in Dubai. The apt theme of the conference attracted the Professor and he was ready to shell out 350 Euros for booking it in Dubai, but later understood that Hotel doesn't exist as, an email asked him to transfer the money to a bank in Africa. In reality the real conference was the International Conferences on Ending Extreme Poverty (5).

It's a topic of interest in many of the blogs by various affected people from various universities talking about the fun of being "invited to give a talk at a congress?" The event organizers like BITs or ICDDT and their hot topics are the matter of funny discussions. Gertsch Group of University of Bern, Switzerland quotes in their blog that "I have been invited to chair a whole session at an international congress, in which he states that it is not his research area of work". Moreover, it also adds that an International Conference on Drug Discovery in Pre-clinical Research" which was quoted to have taken place in Dubai between Feb 7th-10th of 2011, never took place in reality.

In the era of email correspondence, rampant charade conferences, use of digital information gathered from websites, publications are misused for making customerized letters to cheat unexpected Scientist, is a new problem to encounter. This rampant growth of non-existent conferences, meetings advertised with alien speakers and the event conducted with ghost audiences makes the joy of attending a research gathering forfeited.

If you have decided to attend a conference remember the following:

- Prefer to attend only the reputed conferences known to have credibility over the period of time.

- Annual meet of societies are much preferred.
- Use appropriate website meant for conferences advertised in academic journals.
- Do not believe unsolicited emails giving you unexpected favors.
- Never share your credit card details with unknown websites.
- Alert your peer group in case you come across any fraudulent websites or on conferences in your subject of interest.

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