

A virtual ISTH Congress

The annual ISTH Congress is a much-anticipated event that draws the thrombosis and hemostasis community together to hear about the latest developments in research and clinical practice, share findings and expertise, network with colleagues, and learn about new therapies and diagnostics. A key aspect of this Congress, as with any good scientific meeting, centers on connections between colleagues: renewing friendships or making new ones, working on collaborations, and exploring job opportunities. Since the ISTH Congress moves to a different city in a different country every year, an attractive side-benefit of attending this meeting is experiencing the local culture, sights, and cuisine. The 2020 ISTH Congress was going to be held in northern Italy—famous for all three of these attractions—so it seemed unsurprising that it was on track to have near-record attendance. The devastating COVID-19 pandemic changed everything, and suddenly scientific meetings across the world are being canceled or postponed. The Local Organizing Committee—many of them clinicians on the front lines of dealing with COVID-19 patients in northern Italy—were faced with the unenviable task of changing the Congress on short notice.

Together with the ISTH leadership and staff, the Local Organizing Committee made the bold move to put on the first virtual ISTH Congress, which will be held July 12–14, 2020. This exciting experiment promises to open the meeting up to an even wider audience, since attendance will be free (after registering) and you don't need to leave your office or home to participate fully. While the exact program lineup is still a work in progress as of this writing, the Virtual Congress (<https://www.isth2020.org/>) will feature a mixture of on-demand and live programming, including two plenary sessions each day, multiple State-of-the-Art symposia, oral communications and virtual poster sessions. Industry partners will also share their latest diagnostic and therapeutic developments and products in the form of live and recorded symposia, product theaters and virtual exhibits. Late-breaking abstracts (including COVID-19-related science) will be accepted between May 20 and June 3. In an important step, most of the oral sessions will be accompanied by moderated chat functions to allow participants to ask questions of leading experts.

A recent innovation of the yearly ISTH Congresses was the integration of the SSC meetings into the Congress itself. This year,

however, the SSC activities will be conducted in a virtual manner starting in June, which should allow the important SSC presentations, discussions, and functions to be carried out in an effective manner.

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many scientific societies to undertake an experiment in conducting large-scale virtual meetings. While losing the many benefits of interacting with colleagues in person, it is nevertheless turning out that there are some real advantages to online meetings. Certainly, being able to attend the meeting without traveling (and, at least this year, without a registration fee) opens it up to many people who, for a variety of reasons, aren't able to travel or who could not have afforded to participate. For example, Achakulvisut et al¹ report that holding an online meeting meant that about two-thirds of the participants were trainees. Those authors noted that everyone was able to see the speaker and slides more clearly than in many lecture halls, and also felt that asking questions of the speakers was conducted in a more democratic way—rather than the situation often encountered at in-person congresses, in which a few questioners can dominate the sessions.

We very much look forward to participating in the first Virtual ISTH Congress in July. Our hearts go out to the Local Organizing Committee in Italy, who have had so many challenges thrown at them this year and who have handled them with remarkable agility, resilience, and now, organizational creativity. We also wonder if lessons learned from conducting virtual scientific meetings this year might apply to future, in-person meetings in ways that may allow colleagues who can't attend in person to still participate in an active way.

James H. Morrissey¹
David Lillicrap²

¹*Departments of Biological Chemistry & Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

²*Department of Pathology & Molecular Medicine, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada*

REFERENCE

1. Achakulvisut T, Ruangrong T, Bilgin I, et al. Improving on legacy conferences by moving online. *eLife*. 2020;9:e57892.