

Presentation or persecution?

Dry mouth, cold sweat, pumping heart, marshmallow legs, neurotransmitter overload. Is anybody listening to me? Why do I put myself through this?

Unwashed and un-ironed, unprepared and unintelligible, inaudible, inarticulate and down right illiterate. Why do I put myself through this?

Who said what? If we told you it involved a lecturer and a student would you be any the wiser? Did you assume that only students get dry mouths? And that only lecturers are so judgmental?

We all remember the first lecture we gave and the absolute fear it induced. Facing a hundred unknown students, armed only with a collection of overheads and hoping they wouldn't walk out half way through. And we're sure you can remember a lecture you couldn't hear or understand and a lecturer with highly questionable dress sense. So what is it about presenting that turns rational people into gibbering idiots?

Presentations are not tortures that are thought up specifically for undergraduate

programmes. The art of presenting is an internationally recognised key skill. Pharmacists in all branches of the profession require it: from patient-pharmacist interactions in the community or on the ward, to delivering prescribing information to GPs or consultants. You may even be invited to present your latest research findings at the British Pharmaceutical Conference. Whatever the occasion, the framework is the same, and following some simple rules will ensure a credible performance.

Getting started

Undergraduate presentations may be as simplistic as feeding back your group's answers in a workshop or as daunting as your final year project seminar.

Most pharmacy courses are increasing the number of presentations that students have to give and introducing them from level one. Standards of expertise will be expected to rise as students progress through their degree but the underlying principles are the same. Stand up, speak up and shut up.

The first thing to know is what's

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expected and when. Is this an impromptu presentation or do you have weeks to prepare? Are you choosing the topic or is it a stated subject?

Choosing the topic

Students often believe that if the topic is their choice it will be easier, and certainly this freedom allows you to impart your enthusiasm for a subject. All too often, however, it leads to indecision and delay in preparation. Try to identify the subject quickly, and stick with it. Don't change just because information seems scarce or too prolific. Remember your first thoughts are usually the best in this area and half an hour spent initially evaluating the ideas is often sufficient to make your choice.

More frequently, at undergraduate level, you will be given a specific title, and at least part of the burden of preparing has been removed.

Gathering the information

The amount of research that you have to undertake at this point will be highly dependent on your knowledge level. It may be a subject that you already

have a keen interest in, and you feel comfortable that you have all the information to hand. Alternatively the title may appear to be written in a foreign language and a medical dictionary is your first stop for a translation into English.

Using one source, even if it is the most obvious, is seldom enough at this stage, since error and bias can be inadvertently introduced. What resources are available to you? The most obvious starting point, after your own knowledge, is the university library. What about internet access? Do you have a local, recognised expert in this field? To talk about the effect of high doses of alcohol on posture do you need to end up in the gutter after a night on the beer? Whatever the subject area you need to be confident that you have a sufficient depth and breadth of information to distil down.

Bear in mind the timescale and the cost of all this. Do you really need 400 inter-library loans, half of them in Russian, at £1 a go, when the turnaround time is three weeks for a 10-minute presentation?

Now you are familiar with the subject, it's time for the serious work.

Planning the content

Beginnings, middles and ends are essential in most areas of life, and presentations are no exceptions. Different authors use different expressions for this but "tell them what you're going to say, say it, and tell them what you've said" is a fair summary.

The structure that you create, and the discipline with which you order your thoughts is frequently the difference between a good and a mediocre presentation.

Introducing the subject can be a brief overview or an illustration of the context or for the more accomplished, a light-hearted quip. The majority of the talk should be the detail. You should ask yourself regularly "Is this answering or explaining the title?" Don't go off at a tangent, no matter how interesting you find it. Finally, you should remind the audience of the main points you covered. Three is often the most memorable number to convey.

Checking the equipment

Part of the style of your presentation will be determined by the equipment available to you. While this is not important for the content, when you begin to draft the details you will need to know if you are going to use an overhead projector, a fully computerised presentation, flipchart, slide show or all of the above! Confirm in advance what is going to be available to you. There's no point turning up with a disk if the room is kitted out with a blackboard and chalk.

Preparing the visual aids

Impromptu presentations are the only valid reason for hand-written visual aids. Flipcharts, whiteboards and blackboards can be used to supplement or expand on the content, but the most what you have to say should be in legible typescript.

In today's IT driven society there are a number of software packages (examples

include, PowerPoint and Lotus Freelance) that help you create a fully computerised presentation or OHP option, which could include scanned images as well as handouts and speaker's notes. These packages come with idiot-proof wizards, which even the most technophobe lecturer can grasp.

Again, whichever method you choose, the same key principles apply

- ▶ Accurate information
- ▶ Correct spelling (essential)
- ▶ Diagrams should not be too technical
- ▶ A suitable number of slides (certainly no more than one per minute)
- ▶ Avoid making them too busy (seven lines of text is a maximum)
- ▶ Appropriate font and typesize
- ▶ Relevant use of colour.

A slide stating entitled "U and NSU" would not be well received by an audience from the National Union of Students. Always take time to proof the slides, and preferably get someone else to glance at them too; they will often spot errors you miss.

Grooming yourself

So you've got the content, you've got the visual aids, the only bit missing is YOU.

Never underestimate the importance of preparing yourself for this ordeal. Practising the presentation out loud to yourself will probably be more successful than making your friends endure ten painful run throughs. Save the live audience until the dress rehearsal, when their comments will help you lift the performance.

A fully scripted presentation loses the spontaneity, which is the essence of this type of communication. One of two outcomes is inevitable; the presenter reads the text in a lacklustre manner — usually a monotone — and the audience struggles to keep awake. The second outcome, namely attempting to recite from memory, often results in blanking

out and standing open-mouthed with nothing to say.

There are several ways to avoid both of these scenarios. The most common being to make use of the slides as prompts and to talk to each heading. Some people prefer to have small cards with key words or phrases written on them. A4 sheets are not a good idea—they provide a barrier between you and the audience.

There are as many styles of delivery as there are people. This is entirely individual but all the rules of communication apply. You should be audible; is there amplification in the room? Use appropriate language and vary the tone of your voice and be enthusiastic without going over the top. Non-verbal communication (body language) is just as important: make eye contact with the audience, not the floor or the screen and watch out for bizarre body movements. Video playbacks often reveal scratching in the most awkward of places or flailing arms.

Appearing confident is more than half the battle, and you become confident by preparing thoroughly, practising beforehand and feeling good about yourself. Often you will know more about the subject than the audience, which gives you an immediate advantage.

A good presentation usually includes an element of humour, and while no one wants to hear jokes about undertakers in a presentation on palliative care, an amusing and sensitive account of a patient's experience of an opiate may have a very positive impact on the listeners. Appropriateness is the watchword in this case.

Your presentation will probably conclude with a short session of questions, so be prepared for this. Frequently, the questions will simply want clarification of some of the statements you have made. Sometimes they will be about areas of the topic that you have not discussed. Make as full and accurate an answer as you can — but don't attempt to cover up a gap in your knowledge. Say straightaway "I don't know the answer to that but . . ." and go on to include points that may further the discussion of the question.

Finally, be sensitive to your audience. Your appearance is the initial impression they receive, and is often difficult to overcome. A little individuality is fine but cross-dressing at a job interview may not be considered appropriate!

That's all there is to it. We've given you the basics, you now need to try it out for yourself — even Billy Connolly and Ken Dodd had to start somewhere. ✂