

Talk about diving on a ski slope!

If you have ever considered joining the branch meeting speaker circuit, here is your chance to find out more and follow in Dr Brian Lockwood's footsteps

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain has 104 local branches in England, 10 in Wales and 12 in Scotland, the majority of which hold meetings and need speakers. It also provides speakers for meetings in the Isle of Man.

If you are interested in joining the circuit you should let the branch administration in Lambeth (or Cardiff or Edinburgh) know by November, the month in which prospective speakers are usually asked to agree a list of titles and areas to which they are willing to travel.

In the following July to September branch secretaries send off invitations to speakers, either directly, or via the local branch administration at the Society. In the past, either the branch secretaries or the local branch administration at Lambeth agree dates for visits, and then the branch secretaries make local arrangements. Late bookings or cancellations may also be dealt with by either group. Announcements of titles of talks and venues are usually posted in *The Journal* one week in advance, but not necessarily so.

SUBJECT MATTER AND CONTENT

The range of topics covered by local branch speakers is extensive, covering mainly areas of pharmaceutical interest, but also miscellaneous subjects — from religious customs to diving.

In all, there are over 100 topics available. For well over 10 years I have had titles available in the Society's handbook 'Headquarters speakers for branch meetings', and both the titles and content have been arranged for suitability for this type of talk.

I have found that topics at the fringe of pharmacists' interests (such as my collection of cannonballs of raw opium) have not been popular, but mainstream subjects, for example, herbal remedies and aromatherapy, have been extremely popular. The title and brief summary of your talk(s) that are available to branch secretaries must convey the nature of the content — although I once gave a talk where the topic was chosen at random by the branch, I had no knowledge of the subject matter, and I was not even quite sure what the title meant!

Titles and topics not on offer may also be requested by particular branches if they have an interest in something that they are aware a speaker is knowledgeable about.

TRAVEL AND HOUSEKEEPING

Speakers have the option of stipulating areas of Britain that they are willing to visit, and also the type of audio-visual facilities they require. I am happy to go anywhere in Britain, but to date I have only been asked to meetings in England, Wales and the Isle of

Man. The simplest audio-visual equipment is the safest, although you can always travel with all the necessary equipment, but this is not practical if using public transport. I have had plans to make PowerPoint presentations which have been scuppered because there has been no projector available, and plans for an overhead projector, and no overhead projector available. This former situation gives you a chance to use your emergency set of overheads you knew you were going to need anyway, and the latter situation gives an immediate chance to become an after-dinner speaker without the worries of anticipation.

Travel arrangements are decided by the speaker. Although the train is useful for central venues in major cities, particularly London, the car is more convenient, as you can carry any aid you may require. You may also find it a convenient place to wait to meet the local branch representative — remember that most invitations are issued for the winter months. Flight is essential to the Isle of Man, as ferries may be up to a day late.

If you plan to get home immediately after the event, as I do in the case of London venues, it is safer to drive as you are quite likely to miss the last train.

I have experienced a wide variety of types of hospitality before, during, and after talks. Occasionally the speaker will be invited to dinner with either or both the branch secretary and the chairperson, either in the venue or elsewhere. More commonly there will be a buffet at the venue for all participants.

A satisfactory trend I have experienced in some branches is for everyone to sit down to dinner after the talk, and conversation may then range over the speaker's topic, local pharmaceutical business and other local issues, such as the effect of the foot and mouth epidemic in 2001.

Depending on the speaker's travel arrangements, accommodation may be required, and in my case this has always been dealt with by the local branch. I have always found this satisfactory, sometimes superb. Standard motel-type accommodation is the mainstay, but I have sampled the delights of a bed and breakfast on Dartmoor in December.

THE MEETING AND VENUE

The talk usually lasts about one hour (including questions) and it is often timetabled to start at a fixed time. However, this has gone awry on occasions; notably when the sponsoring company uses the occasion to host a presentation itself which, at worst, may go on for an hour as well.

The mainstay venues appear to be the local hospital postgraduate training suite, and academic or industrial pharmaceutical premises but, increasingly, hotel accommodation is used. Perhaps the most interesting

venue I have been to was a restaurant overlooking a ski slope.

REFLECTIONS

For obvious reasons the secretary and other branch officials are the people that you have most contact with at one of these events, and I have found all of them outgoing, interesting to talk to and friendly. Without them there would be no branch, no meeting and no speakers.

Some may think that for the speaker this is a free holiday, but to make a talk successful you have to put in a lot of time and effort. Not only do you have to prepare the talk, spend time getting there and back (if the branch is at the other end of the country) but there is little time to enjoy available facilities, or explore an interesting area particularly as most meetings are scheduled for midweek evenings.

The benefits are, however, rewarding if you like meeting very keen pharmacists, and getting a wide insight into many other aspects of the profession of pharmacy. After a long time in academic pharmacy I have met many pharmacists, and it is enjoyable to renew their acquaintance and see how their careers have developed, as well as be encouraged by seeing preregistration trainees attending.

Over the past few years I have seen lecturer evaluation forms in use at meetings, but no feedback has ever come my way. I presume the intention of using these forms is to improve the lecture content and delivery — so either I must be very good or so bad they cannot bear to tell me so.

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