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Delivering a powerful oral presentation: all the world's a stage

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Oral presentations are, to a great extent, a matter of talent, but they can be practised and improved. There are three kinds of presentations: the short talk (5-10 minutes), the intermediate talk (15 minutes) and the long talk (approximately 45 minutes). Whatever the kind of the presentation, careful preparation is mandatory. The speaker needs to know how long the presentation is expected to be, who the audience is and what main messages should be conveyed. Power point and other visual aids may be appropriately used to facilitate communication. The information presented by these aids should be simple, concrete and intelligible, and the presenter should refrain from reading out the slides word for word. During the presentation, several pitfalls should be avoided: wrong type of presentation, exceeding the allocated time, poor structure, inadequate use of power point and/or other visual aids, poor control of language, poor control of voice, poor appearance on the podium, and poor control of nerves. Ideally, the successful oral presentation is a performance. Thus, the speaker may make the most of appearance, voice, eye contact and movement, in order to increase eloquence.

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Public speech has been a vital part of public life for centuries. Lectures are used by politicians, preachers, academicians, teachers and other professions. In medicine, they represent an important mode of education, at both undergraduate and post-graduate level. Indeed, most of us remember one or two tutors who used to deliver powerful lectures throughout our medical education and careers. Oral presentations are, to a great extent, a matter of talent, but they can be practised and improved. In ancient Greece and Rome, rhetoric belonged to the treasury of education. Modern medicine offers numerous opportunities for oral presentations,

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and the gifted speaker is immediately recognisable among teaching staff.

The three kinds of oral presentations

Generally, there are three kinds of oral presentations: the short talk (5-10 minutes), the intermediate talk (15 minutes) and the long talk (approximately 45 minutes).^{1, 2} These kinds of presentations differ not only in length, but also in academic status of the presenter, subject matter of the presentation and type of audience.¹⁻³ It is, therefore, imperative for the presenter to know which kind of presentation he has been asked to deliver, so as to make preparations accordingly. These differences between types of presentations notwithstanding, there are basic principles common to all types, as discussed in the next section.

The short talk (5-10 minutes)

This is usually given by younger doctors, including senior house officers, in departmental meetings. It is most commonly a case presentation with emphasis on the rarity of the case and/or the challenges relevant to clinical presentation, diagnosis and management.^{1, 2}

The speaker needs to be succinct and to make sure that he can deliver the main message within the allocated time.^{1, 3}

To succeed in this task, he needs practice and rehearsing.

The latter is particularly important when the speaker is less experienced. In the presentation,

appropriate visual aids may be used, notably power point or overhead projector and/or imaging studies (X-rays, CT scan or MRI).

Obviously, visual aids must be very carefully chosen to convey the message as concisely and elegantly as possible.¹⁻³

The intermediate talk (15 minutes)

This is usually entrusted to more senior doctors, such as specialist registrars or even consultants.^{2, 3} The talk is delivered either as part of a round table or as a presentation to a research society. The speaker may provide a brief review on a given subject or his own group's results from a research project. In case the talk is held in a research society, senior academic members frequently attend.^{1, 3} Again, the talk needs meticulous preparation, and the allotted time should not be exceeded. The most important visual aid is power point.^{2, 4, 5} This medium needs to be used judiciously, to sum up the main points and clarify the message.^{4, 5}

The long talk (around 45 minutes)

Only senior doctors (professors or long respected consultants) are invited to deliver a long lecture. This may be divided into the following categories: the teaching lecture, the lecture delivered at a symposium, the state-of-the art guest lecture and the eponymous lecture.² The teaching lecture is delivered in a university and covers a subject that needs to be learnt by students. The lecture delivered at a symposium is delegated to doctors who have experience in the field covered by the lecture and who may present their own data. The state-of-the art guest lecture is given by experienced doctors, and the subject of the lecture may be the speaker's choice. The distinguished academicians may deliver the eponymous lecture, which bears the name of a prior pioneer in the field. In the eponymous lecture, it is customary to begin with a few words to honour the prior pioneer and then provide a comprehensive review of what has been accomplished in the field, including the speaker's own work.² In the long talk, especially the eponymous lecture, senior academicians may sit in the audience, while journalists may also be present.

Preparation of the oral presentation

Whatever the kind of the presentation, careful preparation is mandatory. Judicious work is required through all stages of preparation.^{3, 6-10}

General information

To begin with, it is vital to know in what type of meeting the presentation will be delivered.⁶⁻⁹ In case the presentation is part of a symposium, it is good to know who else will be speaking and what their exact subjects are. In case it is meant for a scientific association, the presenter needs to ascertain the rules that apply to presentations in this group. Information is also needed regarding length and type of the presentation, as well as who the audience will be. The type of the audience is essential in selecting the scientific level of the presentation.⁶⁻⁹ The number of the audience is also important to know, because more engaging presentations, often without podium, are very effective in small, informally seated groups.⁶⁻¹⁰

The title

The title should be simple, but, at the same time inviting. In didactic lectures, the title is usually very short and straightforward, whereas eponymous lectures call for more elaborate, witty titles that create great expectations.^{3, 6-9} Presentations in symposia commonly have titles chosen by the chairman or the organisers, but some variation may be asked for by the speaker.

Collection of relevant data

Even in the longest of lectures, it is impossible to include all data available.^{3, 6-9} Hence, some selection is necessary. Selection depends on the type and duration of the presentation, as well as on the audience, in as much as this determines what is supposed to be known and what needs to be covered. One may choose not to discuss some aspects of the subject, and this may be declared at the start.^{3, 6-9}

Structure of the presentation

Every presentation needs to be structured.^{3, 6-9} Not only does adequate structure help the audi-

ence follow the argument, but it also provides a framework for the presenter, which ensures appropriate selection and arrangement of data. The presentation may be divided into introduction, main part, and conclusions.^{3, 6-9} In the introduction, the speaker aims to bring about the subject. The introduction should be very simple, especially when talking to non-experts. It should also invoke interest in the audience. A traditional technique involves the use of a joke, a famous (but, preferably, not very expected) quotation, or a story in the very beginning. Such tricks, however, may have disastrous results in the hands of the inexperienced speaker. Clichés and obscene jokes should be avoided by all means.^{3, 6-9} The main part encompasses the important aspects of the talk. It is best to subdivide the main part into sections discussing the major aspects, presented in a logical order (for instance, pathogenesis, diagnosis, treatment).^{3, 6-9} The conclusions summarise the presentation. The speaker may offer practical, take-home messages and suggest emerging possibilities for the near future. Again, a joke, a famous quotation or some other story may be used, if they are felt to provide a clue to the current situation. Another variant would be to ask a question in the title and in the introduction, which is finally answered at the end of the presentation.^{3, 6-9}

Rehearsal

It is advisable to rehearse before the final day of the presentation.^{3, 6-10} The less experienced the speaker, the more important rehearsal becomes. The speaker should practice both alone and in front of colleagues, to make sure the presentation is intelligible, visual aids are clear and the talk does not exceed allocated time. This communication can also offer constructive criticism and help prepare questions.^{3, 6-10} Perfectionists would demand the final rehearsal to take place with the speaker dressed in the clothes he intends to wear for the actual presentation.

Power point and other visual aids

Nowadays, the vast majority of oral presentations use power point projection.^{3-5, 11, 12} Alterna-

tives include blackboard and chalk, board and coloured pen, flipcharts, overhead projectors and conventional slides. Whatever the medium chosen, it must be borne in mind that it is meant to help the audience follow, rather the speaker present what he is supposed to have rehearsed enough. Consequently, the information presented by these aids should be simple, concrete and intelligible.^{3-5, 11, 12} A common but unforgivable mistake is not to present a genuine line of thought but to read out the slides or overheads word for word.

The following rules of thumb apply to power point presentations.

Number of slides

The number of slides is, generally, determined by the duration of the presentation.^{4, 5, 11, 12} The traditional rule is to show, approximately, one to two slides per minute. Naturally, this depends on the content and complexity of the slides, as well. Showing too many slides places the speaker at risk of changing them too quickly for the audience to follow.^{4, 5, 11, 12} By contrast, the speaker should ask himself during the preparation of every slide what this slide really adds to the presentation and if it is worth adding it.

Avoid overcrowded slides

Slides should be as simple and legible as possible.^{3-5, 11, 12} Again, there is a golden rule that there should be no more than seven lines per slide and seven words per line. Clarity is increased by avoiding full sentences, *e.g.*, "Clinical presentation: gradual weakness, shortness of breath", rather than "The patient also reported that he had been gradually complaining of weakness, which had been accompanied by shortness of breath, as well".^{4, 5, 11, 12} For the same reason, it is best to use two separate slides, rather than merging all information into a single complicated one.^{4, 5, 11, 12}

Never use a slide for which you have to apologise

This is also a common mistake, especially with less experienced speakers. If the speaker needs to apologise for a slide, he had better not show it at all.

Prefer plain appearance

This means avoidance of elaborate logos, sophisticated background effects and ornate edges.^{4, 5, 11, 12} Some authorities advocate the use of simpler fonts (sans serif), like Arial or Tahoma, rather than more complicated ones (serifed faces), such as Times New Roman or Bookman Old Style, but this is not compulsory.^{8, 13} Moreover, use of lower-case letters and avoidance of capital letters has been suggested, as the latter take longer to read.¹³

Use harmonious pleasant colours

Simple colours are desirable both in the background and in the text.^{4, 5, 11, 12} The wisest choice is dark background (mostly blue or black) with white and yellow text, or, vice versa, white background with dark text (black or grey or dark blue). Whichever the choice, it should be used consistently throughout the presentation. In the opposite case, the audience may feel that the presentation is a haphazard conglomeration of slides from previous or other people's work.^{4, 5, 11, 12}

Avoid motion and similar effects

Medical students often like to show off with different slide transition (slides moving in from various angles), moving letters and words or moving images. This only adds to the comical quality of the presentation and undermines the possibility that the content might be taken seriously.^{4, 5, 11, 12}

Simplify tables and figures

Tables and figures should be as simple as possible, in order to be easily discernible from the rear seats of the auditorium. Two small tables are preferable to a huge one.^{4, 5, 11, 12}

Avoid pointing to every single word with the laser pointer

Experienced speakers use the laser pointer sparingly, only to highlight an aspect in a figure or table. Staccato pointing to every word is both unnecessary and extremely tiresome.^{4, 5, 11, 12} Equally irritating is wavering aimlessly on the screen, on the ceiling or on the floor with the laser pointer.

Awkward power point projections have been severely criticised.^{5, 12} Interestingly, there is evidence that, as scientific associations mature, oral presentations, including utilisation of power point, improve.³

Simple layout, avoidance of overcrowding, and sparing use of material are the fundamental rules for overheads, too. It is more elegant if these are printed, but in less formal meetings it is acceptable to use handwritten ones, provided the handwriting is clear and perfectly legible. Colours should be used harmoniously, and emphasis may be achieved by means of capitalisation or underlined text.^{7, 8}

Some general advice

In the preparation of oral presentations, some general advice may be helpful. The most important is careful planning and constant practice. Further useful tips include:^{3, 7, 9, 10}

— always stay updated on the subject: when having given an oral presentation in the past, one may be invited to deliver another presentation on the same subject. It is, therefore, reasonable to stay updated on the subject. Thus, one may easily respond to the next invitation and, possibly, increase the number of presentations that one can effortlessly deliver;^{3, 7, 9}

— attend as many presentations as possible: sitting frequently in the audience is helpful in many ways.^{7, 8} First, it provides an opportunity of assimilating new knowledge in the field, especially on the subject that one has already talked about or is expected to deliver a presentation in the future. Secondly, it enables the attendee to see how more experienced speakers organise their presentations in terms of structure and choice of data. Last but not least, it shows how speakers appear on stage and how they control their non-verbal communication issues (e.g., voice or eyes).^{7, 8} One can always learn by attending presentations, even by noticing the mistakes of others;

— if possible, try to visit the auditorium beforehand: a visit to the auditorium in advance will provide useful information about the podium, the number of seats, the light, the technical facilities and related issues. Furthermore, it will familiarise the speaker with the place, thereby reducing anxiety;^{3, 7, 9, 10}

— arrive very early for the presentation: this guarantees enough time to upload the presentation and to check that the material can be used. Timely arrival also gives the opportunity to capture the general atmosphere of the meeting and hear any preceding presentation or discussion with the audience that might be relevant to one's own presentation.^{7, 9, 10} Finally, it contributes to acclimatisation with the lecture hall and control of nerves.

The oral presentation: a performance?

The successful oral presentation does not merely involve talking. Instead, it may be regarded as a performance. This applies to appearance, voice, eye contact and movement.⁷⁻¹⁰ Especially, the first impression of the speaker is critical for the audience in the decision to pay attention or not.

Appearance

Most of all, the speaker should appear calm and confident. Clothes should be well-chosen, elegant and conservative, without drawing too much attention on themselves.⁷⁻¹⁰

Voice

The quality of the voice is very important.⁷⁻¹⁰ The speaker should be articulate and audible. Mumbling or monotonous voice is very disappointing. Correct pronunciation is an absolute virtue.⁷⁻¹⁰ Intonation should be harmonious, natural and expressive. For this purpose, speech should be neither too quick nor too slow, and emphasis should be placed on the words conveying the major messages.⁷⁻¹⁰ This does not mean that every single word must be stressed, as this creates a sing-song atmosphere on the verge of monotony.⁷⁻¹⁰ Few presenters realise that emphatic pauses after key messages are very efficient. Finally, the speaker should make sure that his/her voice is steady and audible even when he/she turns away from the microphone to point to the screen.

Eye contact

The best speakers know how to establish eye contact with the audience.⁷⁻¹⁰ This adds cred-

ibility to the presentation and engages the audience in attentive listening or active participation. By contrast, talking to one's own notes, to the screen, to the floor or to the ceiling does not look convincing.⁷⁻¹⁰ In establishing eye contact, the speaker should not just look at the first and second row of seats, but try to take a glimpse of all parts of the auditorium (right and left, front middle and rear) to show that he is taking everyone seriously.⁷⁻¹⁰

Movement

Arguably, movement is the most difficult issue to explain and teach. Some presenters prefer to stand behind the podium. This stance is acceptable when talking to a large audience. The podium helps the speaker feel less exposed to the audience, and provides shelter for both notes and hands.⁷⁻¹⁰ When talking to small groups, however, especially when the chairs for the audience are arranged in U-shape, it is preferable to speak without a podium and use movement to improve contact with the group.⁷⁻¹⁰ In all cases, movement should be natural and not look like nervous pacing up and down. When making a major point, the speaker may slightly change posture or use hand movement for emphasis. Clearly, control of movement to the benefit of eloquence requires considerable experience and rehearsing. In the opposite case, it may become a caricature.

The oral presentation: common pitfalls

Oral presentations may be subject to several pitfalls, which should be avoided. The commonest of these are as follows.^{2-7, 9}

Wrong type of presentation

Above all, it must be clear what type of presentation is to be delivered.^{1-3, 7, 8} Talking to school-children in a manner well-suited to professors, or vice versa, is guaranteed to fail. As early as during the initial preparation of the presentation, one must bear in mind how long the presentation is expected to be, which audience will be addressed, on which occasion the presenta-

tion takes place and what main messages must be communicated.^{1-3, 7, 8}

Exceeding the allocated time

This should be avoided at all cost.^{1-3, 7-9}

Poor structure of the presentation

Every presentation needs careful structure, which mainly depends on its type.^{1, 2, 6, 8} Inadequate structure will render the presentation incoherent, leading to frustration of the audience.^{1, 2, 6, 8}

Inadequate use of power point and/or other visual aids

Inadequate use of visual aids is, in all ways, detrimental to the presentation.^{4-6, 11, 12} It threatens to hinder concentration, obscure the meaning and spoil the pleasure of listening.

Poor control of language

A presentation can be marred by incorrect language.⁶⁻⁹ Elaborate, pompous sentences are not suitable for oral presentation, because they are extremely difficult to comprehend. This holds especially true for very rare words that are unbeknown to most persons attending the presentation. Conversely, oversimplified style runs the risk of offending the audience. Clarity, brevity and elegance are the absolute virtues that speakers should aim for.⁶⁻⁹ The style should be appropriate for speech, not reading, and words should flow harmoniously, avoiding stereotypes.⁶⁻⁹

Poor control of voice

It is strongly advisable to speak at one's natural pace, rather than too quickly or too slowly.⁶⁻⁹ Too rapid speech trying to convey too many messages in a short period of time sounds unnatural and awkward. Similarly, too slow speech may become boring and even sound presumptuous. Monotony should be avoided by all means. At the same time, the speaker should keep away from undue emphasis on nearly every word spoken, as this distracts from concentration and may become irritating.⁶⁻⁹

Poor appearance on the podium

An ideal presentation is perfected by adequate appearance on the podium. Both too casual look and flamboyant colors need to be avoided.^{6, 7, 9, 10} The speaker should be able to stand and move naturally on the podium, looking neither rigidly motionless nor comically restless.^{6, 7, 9, 10}

Poor control of nerves

Looking nervous is not to the speaker's benefit. Arriving on time, familiarising oneself with the auditorium and talking a few deep breaths before the presentation may be of considerable help. Naturally, rehearsal and experience help towards control of nerves.^{6, 7, 9}

Conclusions

While they depend considerably on talent, oral presentations can be practised and improved.^{3, 7} There are three kinds of presentations: the short talk (5-10 minutes), the intermediate talk (15 minutes) and the long talk (approximately 45 minutes).^{1, 2} Whatever the kind of the presentation, careful preparation is mandatory. The speaker needs to know how long the presentation is expected to be, who the audience is and what main messages should be conveyed.⁶⁻⁹ Power point and other visual aids may be employed to facilitate communication.^{4, 5, 11, 12} Yet, beyond mere talking, the successful oral presentation may be regarded as a performance.^{7, 10} Ideally, the speaker may make the most of appearance, voice, eye contact and movement, in order to increase eloquence.⁷⁻¹⁰ The successful speaker is readily recognisable, because he knows that "all the world's a stage".¹⁴

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