SELECTING THE PROGRAMME FOR EDTA

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Between 1972 and 1978, the proportion of submitted abstracts which could be accommodated in the programme of EDTA as oral presentations varied between 15 and 25%. Parallel sessions were introduced in 1979 to prevent that proportion falling even further to a ludicrously low figure (Figure 1). Even with this innovation, and with the poster sessions introduced in 1977, it is still necessary to reject about three quarters of all submitted papers. It is therefore essential that the programme should be chosen fairly and that this should be appreciated by the members. This account of the selection process is presented to reassure members and to seek their comments on possible improvements.

The Guidelines for Selection Committee

The procedures described below are not incorporated in our constitution; it is up to each Council to decide whether to follow them but in practice they have been closely observed since 1973 when a sub-committee under the chairmanship of Professor Charles van Ypersele drew up a series of guidelines which were ratified by Council and distributed to members. Spare copies are still available on request from the Secretary/Treasurer.

The Programme Selection Committee

This committee of five is elected each year by Council, from among the members of Council. It is usual to serve for two or three years. The selection committee meets the day before the Spring Council Meeting and draws up a provisional programme which is presented the following day to the full Council. The chairman of selection committee reads all abstracts and may mark them but his marks are not used in the selection process, since he has access to the names of authors. He receives the abstracts, distributes them to selectors, compiles the marks and prepares the league table of scientific merit.

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The Call for Abstracts

Members are asked to submit an abstract on a prepared form and to identify themselves and their institution only in the designated spot below the title; the text should not reveal their identity. They also submit several anonymous copies or photostats of the abstract with authors' names and institution obliterated. These anonymous copies are sent to the selectors.
The Selectors

Twelve council members act as selection panel. Up to 1978 every selector marked every abstract. By 1977 this had become a heavy burden. The marks were obtained in time for Council Meeting only by dint of much telephone and telegram communication. We predicted that the number of abstracts would not increase in 1978 (when our meeting was close to the ISN) but would increase sharply in 1979; these predictions were fulfilled (Figure 1). We therefore carried out a statistical analysis of the selection process in 1977 [1] and repeated it in 1978; a full description of the repeat analysis is available on request. Our second cluster analysis showed that individual selectors did not follow a predictable pattern from year to year; it was not possible to subdivide the panel into disparate groups. We confirmed our previous finding that about three-quarters of the papers chosen by all twelve selectors would have been chosen by a random sample of six selectors. Consequently we recommended the use of six selectors in 1979, as described below.

The Marking System

Selectors mark the abstracts on scientific merit which is taken to comprise: 1) Originality; 2) Adequate data; 3) Logical conclusions; 4) Interest to the association. They mark on a scale from 0 to 5 and are asked to aim at a roughly Gaussian distribution of their marks, giving a mean mark of 2.5. Selectors do not mark abstracts from their own institution or other work with which they have a personal connection; the mean mark of the other selectors is substituted.

Allocation of Time on the Programme

Council decides in advance the approximate sub-division of time. In 1977–1978 we aimed at one day each of dialysis, transplantation and nephrology; in 1979, with parallel sessions spreading the subjects to more than one day, we still aimed at a roughly equal allocation of time to each. This policy was criticised in 1977 because there were many more abstracts on dialysis than other topics. As a result a dialysis paper had to score a mean mark of about 3.2 to be assured of a place on the Helsinki programme while a transplantation or nephrology paper was accepted at a mark down to about 2.5. However the situation had greatly improved by 1979, when the mean marks for accepted papers in the three sections were almost identical. This seems to vindicate Council’s belief that, with time, the abstracts submitted would fall in line with time allocation, giving a better balanced programme.

Each member of selection committee assigns to each abstract a designation of ‘dialysis’, ‘transplantation’ or ‘nephrology’. The decision is usually unanimous but a few papers fall on the watersheds. The chairman makes a final judgement and prepares his ‘league table’ with the abstracts divided under these three headings.

On this ‘league table’, each abstract number is marked ‘O’, ‘O/P’ or ‘P’ which indicates the preference expressed by the authors when submitting the manuscript: ‘oral presentation only’, ‘oral presentation preferred, prepared to give as a poster’ or ‘poster preferred’. All papers marked ‘O’ or ‘O/P’ are considered first for oral
presentation, without distinction. Then all papers marked ‘P’ and all papers marked ‘O/P’ which have not been chosen for oral presentation are considered for the poster sessions, without distinction. The author who would prefer to give his paper orally, but would be willing to present it as a poster, therefore has nothing to lose and everything to gain by ticking the ‘O/P’ box on the abstract submission form.

Selecting the Programme

The selection committee first decides on a cut-off point for oral papers, above which all abstracts are automatically accepted. The line is drawn while the abstracts are still represented by anonymous numbers. The aim is to fill as near as possible to 70% of the programme with these obligatory papers, chosen solely for scientific merit, and to choose the remaining 30% from the immediately subjacent layer to provide a wide spread of subject matter and to ensure that the smaller countries in the EDTA sometimes appear on the programme. It has rarely been necessary in recent years to choose papers on the latter criterion; the geographic spread of our programme, chosen on scientific merit, has been impressive.

In 1977, when the submitted abstracts were unevenly distributed between the main topics of the conference, we could choose only half the programme by setting the cut-off. The situation had improved by 1979 when 67% of the programme was chosen by setting the cut-off mark at 3.1. All other papers were chosen from the range 2.8 to 3.0 to provide a balance in subject matter.

The process is now repeated to choose the poster papers. Their number is limited by the display space available and the size of the Proceedings. Scientific merit is again the main criterion but we have tried to select groups of papers with similar subject matter to encourage discussion of posters.

Use of Two Selection Panels in 1979

The studies described above under ‘The Selectors’ showed that panels of six selectors would choose about three quarters of the papers chosen by the full panel of twelve. These studies presupposed a random allocation of abstracts to a random selection of referees, which we deemed too complicated for one secretary dealing with an avalanche of mail. We therefore divided the twelve selectors into two panels of six, matched as far as possible for special interest. Alternate abstracts were sent to each panel except that every fifth abstract was sent to both panels with no indication that it was a ‘marker’. The two panels had marked 80 abstracts in common a few days before the council meeting when a decision had to be made whether to ‘scale’ the marks. They had awarded mean marks of 2.55 and 2.48, which were not significantly different. There was a very reasonable correlation between the marks awarded to individual abstracts by the two panels (r = 0.584, p < 0.001) so the marks were not scaled. If experience is similar in 1980 it should be possible to reduce the proportion of ‘markers’ as the total number of abstracts increases, e.g. to one in ten. This will extend the intake of abstracts which can be handled on the present time scale to 500–550. If the submissions
increase beyond this figure it will be necessary to reduce the size of panels further (our studies suggested that three selectors would be acceptable, single selectors quite unacceptable), recruiting additional referees or advancing the deadline for submission of abstracts.

An analysis of the 80 'markers' in 1979 confirmed that little 'injustice' resulted from the smaller panels. The cut-off mark for these 80 abstracts marked by all twelve selectors, to provide the top 25% of papers, was 2.83 and the chosen papers ranged from 2.83 to 4.0. Had panel A selected their 'top twenty' it would have included 16 of those chosen by the whole panel and the four 'rogues' had marks of 2.67, 2.67, 2.58 and 2.33 from the whole panel. Had panel B done the whole job their top 17 would have included 14 from the majority verdict and the three 'rogues' all had marks of 2.75. The use of fewer selectors must increase the element of chance in programme selection but with our present size of panel the effect is acceptably small.

Notification of Members

Letters of acceptance for oral presentation and of rejection are duplicated in advance so that announcements can be posted in the three days after the council meeting. The arrangements for posters have varied from year to year so letters on this topic have been drawn up in the week after the council meeting and posted the week after. Consequently an announcement that your paper had been accepted for poster presentation may have reached you up to ten days after the news of acceptance or rejection of other abstracts. With standardisation of poster arrangements in should be possible to send out all replies over a four or five day period in future.

All abstracts received by the deadline are published in the Conference Book of Abstracts, whether or not they are accepted for presentation at the meeting.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

1 Appleton, DR and Kerr, DNS (1978) Brit. med. J., i, 421

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