

## **First IACFS/ME Virtual Research Conference: A Review and Reflection**

Given the cancellation of the 2020 in-person IACFS/ME conference due to COVID restrictions, the Board decided to plan an alternative, if shortened, virtual meeting to gauge interest from the ME/CFS community. The half-day (Zoom) conference was held on August 21, 2020 and attracted 274 attendees from around the world, including researchers, clinicians, professional trainees, and patients. The attendance figure reached 80+ % of our in-person numbers. As one of the host moderators, it was clear to me that attendees were strongly engaged in the researcher presentations, given scores of questions and comments.

The Q and A feature was especially effective as ALL written questions were auto-posted and efficiently directed to speakers. I believe that many more questions were answered in this virtual (vs. in person) format because presenters had the option of selectively typing in answers as well as responding orally. Session topics included COVID-19, Treatments, Immunology, Metabolism, Heart rate variability and Clinical networks. Similar to our in-person meetings, fully accredited CME was available. The feedback I received indicated that the format of short (10 min) talks kept people's attention and that the 5 hours went by very quickly. A conference recording will be sent out to all attendees. For interested individuals who did not attend, a conference recording is available at:

### **Post-Conference Report**

The post-conference feedback online (N=119) indicated that 85% enjoyed the meeting overall. People liked the Topics (86%) and Speakers (73%). About 60% liked the online format and that it was recorded. Regarding dislikes, 40% stated they had no complaints really; about a quarter each wanted a longer meeting or had other comments. From the written comments: About 20 respondents wanted the individual presentations to be longer. Also people thought an online format was very useful, allowing them to attend when they could not otherwise. 88% responded they would attend a future virtual meeting, even if IACFS/ME holds an in-person meeting in addition. With the positive conference experience overall, a future online meeting may be extended to 2 days, with 4 hours of presentations each day using 12-15 minutes time slots for speakers.

Given the success of our first online event and the ongoing reality of COVID limitations, future virtual conferences are certainly on the table for consideration and scheduling. Of course, that could all change with the advent of major new developments in COVID vaccines and therapeutics. We are keeping our options open for a 2021 in-person conference as we have already reserved space for that possibility.

### **Movers and Shakers**

Dr. Lily Chu was the planner, organizer and overall inspiration behind this first IACFS/ME virtual conference. A big Thank You to Lily for her unwavering commitment in time and effort in making this conference a success. I would also like to thank the IACFS/ME board for their sponsorship of the meeting as well as our external conference sponsors, presenters, and all of the attendees who made this meeting the success that it was. Importantly, this event opened up a new type of scientific forum to engage the ME/CFS communities of researchers, clinicians, students and patients. We now look forward to 2021 and the opportunities that it will provide for the presentation of new ME/CFS research in our organized conference settings.