



## ESTRO 2021 - The optimal congress to come together(ish): an online experience

I write this reflection as the sense of the annual congress of the European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (ESTRO) is still fresh in my brain. I am not at the airport, patiently waiting for my flight home; I am already at home, because for the second year in a row I have attended the conference virtually. I must admit I was somewhat pessimistic as I went into the conference online. This was no fault of ESTRO; however, it seems as if we have had a never-ending run of virtual meetings and I feel like my grandfather every time I start a virtual meeting, checking "can you hear me?" Nonetheless, this is our new norm and attending online was an option I preferred to not attending at all, and here's a disclaimer: I am so happy I did.

I prepped well for the congress; since I knew I would be missing the exhibition hall, I ensured that there was ample coffee and pastries in my flat. Luckily for me, not too much coffee was required as the hours of the meeting were not antisocial; I live in the UK, so my time was only one hour behind that of Madrid. I also had the \*luxury\* of attending the morning sessions in the comfort of my pyjamas and I did not have to consider my "ESTRO wardrobe". I could even sit outside on my balcony with a very grey, but still remarkable, backdrop of the London skyline.

I knew I was off to a good start when I faced the all too familiar dilemma of "which session do I attend?" From the start, so many titles intrigued me. I remember the first ESTRO congress I attended in person, frantically running from one session to the next, scheduling in time to attend the exhibition, scheduling wine time to review posters. It was manic, but magic. Was it the same online? No, but yes. There was a lot less physical running; however, there was still a lot of jumping from one session to the next! Moreover, in the breaks I found myself watching sessions I had missed, so did this mean that the all too familiar dilemma had disappeared? Not quite. The congress is over, and I still have quite a lengthy list of sessions I wish to watch, but fortunately there is catch up!

Of course, there are some things I miss about attending a conference in real life; the conversations in corridors, the opportunity to delve into discussions after interesting talks, the evening socials. After the first day I was conscious of this, so on the second day, I took it upon myself to be more interactive. I put my questions in the Q&A box, I started chats with fellow online attendees and I relaxed in the evening to let it all sink in.

When day three came, I was particularly excited as the young track was happening on this day. I was not disappointed. The morning started well, with a very appropriate session on tips to stay healthy and how to recognise the signs of burnout. I knew the session was good when immediately afterwards I found myself Googling some of the initiatives that had been discussed. Next up was the subject of mobility grants/reports, which made me feel inspired as fellow young professionals discussed updates they had undertaken in their practice after they had visited other centres with the support of ESTRO. It left me dreaming of international radiotherapy centres that I would like to visit... someday! I must admit that, after this, I jumped to the radiotherapists' track, but with the excellent catch-up function, I have since been able to watch "making the best use of online resources and meetings for remote (net)working". I was in awe of café roulette, which was organised by the group women in ESTRO in medical physics (WESTRO).

At lunchtime we peaked with a session on equity and diversity. What a brilliant and passionate session, especially with the contributions from Julianne Pollard-Larkin (section chief of the thoracic service, Division of Radiation Oncology, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, USA)! The discussion was nothing short of electric and I was almost tricked into feeling I was in the congress hall with everyone. Finally, the day ended on a high with "Project from A to Z in a hot or new topic. Where do you start? And how to publish?" In practical terms, this was one of the most useful sessions I attended, and the speakers gave some really tangible examples, especially for young professionals. It was not just the young ESTRO content that inspired me, but so many sessions. It was thrilling to see other young professionals present their thought-provoking work.



Then the evening event of day 3 came, and unfortunately, it was not the usual fantastic ESTRO party. It was the event that I was most nervous about this year: the ESTRO mentoring programme. In 2020, I was fortunate enough to be chosen as a mentee for the programme. Unfortunately, it was postponed last year, but with the hybrid congress approach this year, it went ahead. I was excited. I had picked the mentors I wished to have my “radiotherapy speed date” with, and it was finally here. Was I right to be nervous? Maybe; the mentors I had the opportunity to meet were radiation oncology rock-stars and I was lucky enough to get 10 minutes of their time, one-to-one. However, it was clear straight away that they were approachable, willing to talk, and up for supporting us and this programme. Additionally, the virtual meetings with other professionals after three days of online attendance alone were a welcome break. I was having conversations with other professionals - we could see each other, instead of just chat boxes. The fantastic mentoring programme aside, I wonder if we should have more initiatives like this, such as virtual corners and spaces where online attendees can network?

As I finish writing this piece, I estimate that it may have taken the equivalent time of my flight from Madrid to London. However, there is no commute home from the airport for me. I can put my feet up on my couch and relax immediately. My brain is full, I am feeling really inspired and I am truly enthused about what is next in radiotherapy. And what is next for me: do I wish to attend Copenhagen 2022 in real life? Honest answer: Yes. However, I know there may be times in my life when this is not feasible, and an online congress will be much more accessible. I also love the catch-up feature of revisiting the content in my own time; so, I think the optimal congress is online and live where we can all be together(ish) and share our passion for improving radiotherapy for all our patients.



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