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# Gynecology and Minimally Invasive Therapy

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## Letter to the Editor

### Ditch the opening ceremony and name(less) tags, and publicly disclose potential conflict of interest



To the Editor,

Every year, numerous national and regional obstetrics and gynecology (OB/GYN) meetings are held in China. While these meetings provide ample opportunities for scholarly communication and the assimilation of new diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, several troubling oddities of these meetings are at direct odds with international norms and seriously undermine the very purposes of these meetings.

First and foremost, an elaborate, sometimes excruciatingly long, opening ceremony, featuring touchy-feely speeches given by a slew of government officials and dignitaries in descending pecking order, is now a fixture of all meetings. The seemingly incessant jabbering, even a few minutes long, may feel like an eternity to the hundreds of participants coming to the meeting for scholarly purposes. The ceremony is sometimes followed by or paralleled with group photos or, more theatrically, even autographs on a wall-sized billboard designated specifically for very important persons (VIPs).

While these ceremonies could provide the VIPs an intoxicating sense of self-importance and, quite often, handsome fees, they add no value at all to the meetings and in fact show a wanton disregard to the interest of each and every participant who paid his/her registration fee. At the very least, they are inefficient: the meeting could be a feat or bummer with or without these speakers' blessing.

The second oddity is the name tags (or, more appropriately, nameless tags) worn by meeting participants, which frequently display no name at all and are simply only two kinds: Delegate (participant) and Distinguished Guest (or in some cases simply "VIP").

One major function of all professional meetings is to provide a forum to facilitate the exchange of views and ideas among meeting participants. But this can be best accomplished when two sides of the communication are equal. The name(less) tags are a *de-facto* status symbol, artificially and literally generating an inequality in status and making genuine scientific exchange difficult, if not impossible.

Lastly, when industry-sponsored seminars sprinkled in meetings are now common, few, if any, speakers at these seminars in the Chinese OB/GYN meetings publicly declare any potential conflicts of interest, even though they are paid handsomely by the sponsor to speak on the topic that is related with the products that his/her sponsor make. Some even become a hired gun, blatantly promoting the product(s) at the seminar to the unsuspecting audience. This is essentially a misuse of the speaker's scholarly reputation for his/her financial gains, and is entirely and egregiously unethical.

As of now, virtually all diagnostic and therapeutic procedures and drugs in OB/GYN that have been proven to be effective are first

invented or discovered in the West. Even numerous guidelines used in the practice are written by our Western peers. As the most populous country and now the second largest economic entity and the producer of scientific papers in the world, China has the responsibility to help to advance the OB/GYN field. However, the oddities now prevailing in the OB/GYN professional meetings effectively hinder the advancement of the field and should be reformed. Meetings, big or small, can be perfectly fine without any opening ceremony as our Western colleagues have shown. In fact, it would be more efficient time-wise if no opening speech is given by government officials. Name tags showing the bearer's name and affiliation should help to facilitate free and effective exchange of scientific ideas and views. Public disclosure of potential conflicts of interest before lectures in general and specifically in industry-sponsored seminars should provide the audience with awareness necessary to judge the value of the lecture content.

This is particularly urgent since as of now many OB/GYN meetings in China are faced with increasingly dwindling participants (who pay the registration fee out of their own pocket) and some national meetings now increasingly resort to the quota system (assigning certain number of participants for specific institutions). In fact, the registration fees of most, if not all, participants are now shouldered by industry. Aside from the quality, the oddities eluded above may also be responsible for this unenviable situation.

While the alignment with prevailing international norms of professional meetings will not make China a leader in OB/GYN overnight, it should help eliminate the elitism underlying these oddities, foster a healthy culture of scientific meetings, provide an environment that is conducive to free exchange of scientific views and ideas, and prepare young physicians to attune to international norms. Consequently, it is time to ditch the opening ceremony and nameless tags, and publicly disclose potential conflicts of interest in all OB/GYN meetings in China. And the time is now.

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10 November 2015  
Available online 13 January 2016

Conflicts of interest: The author has nothing to disclose.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gmit.2015.11.002>

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