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Experiences of a professional congress organizer: preparing the Wonca Europe Conference



“The Fascination of Complexity – Dealing with Individuals in a Field of Uncertainty”: You have probably come across the typical motto of the Wonca Europe Conference 2009 at the congress and in this special edition in varied ways. We would like to add another aspect to it. Planning, organizing and hosting the Wonca Europe Conference is a highly complex and fascinating matter, especially – as it is the case

this year – when dealing with two congresses in one, not to mention the “VdGM Pre-Conference”. The numbers, including about 500 speakers, 184 hours of scientific issues, 130 hours of workshops (run in 17 parallel sessions) and an estimated 3000–4000 participants from more than 30 countries, show the organizational effort required. Meticulous planning and high flexibility throughout are required to run such a big event smoothly. The secrets to success are solution-oriented attitudes and the capability to meet the manifold expectations. Years of experience in congress organization help to avoid or overcome obstacles.

Dr. Schlegel Healthworld AG (SHW) was asked to support the organizational committee of the Wonca Europe Conference 2009 as the Professional Congress Organizer (PCO) and was given the overall responsibility for the congress. The Wonca Europe Conference 2009 is arranged by the Swiss Society of general practitioners SSMG/SGAM, representing the Swiss Family Medicine at Wonca. It is supported by a national patronage and an international advisory board (fig. 1).

After SSMG/SGAM received the mandate for the Wonca Europe Conference 2009, in Kos in September 2005, and after the organizational committee (OC) and the scientific committee (SC) were constituted, the crucial preparation phase for SHW began at the end of 2006. At first, the setup of a congress platform with all reservations, communication channels, as well as financial budgeting and planning of deadlines were particularly important. The mandate included the overall organizational process with specific reservations of venues, congress technique, support of speakers, handling of participant registrations, preparation of electronic and printed congress documentation, (programmes, website, etc.). And furthermore the detailed reservations of the social programmes, and the congress, were made reality with secured financing. SHW worked together with Basel Tourism for the hotel logistics. In addition to the extensive scientific programme, an industrial fair with 75 exhibitors was also organized.

During the long preparatory phase there were many challenges and obstacles that all could be tackled in the end. The meetings of the OC that took place together with the PCO not only represented the interests of the SSMG/SGAM but also those of about 30 communities of interest. The subject of these meetings was, predominantly, “dealing with individuals” just like the congress motto. Compro-

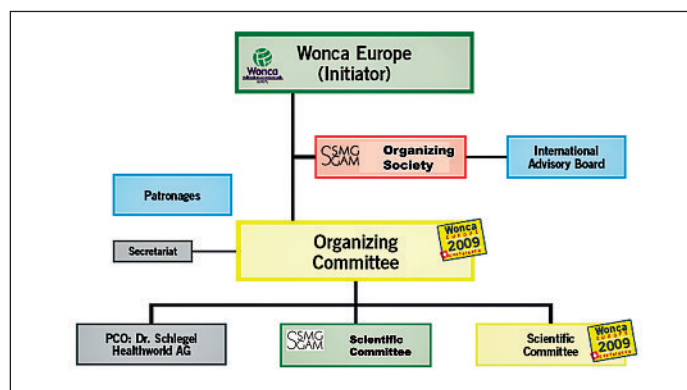


Figure 1
Organizational chart of the Wonca – SSMG/SGAM Conference 2009.

mises had to be found with the objectives, the setup of the scientific programme with its numerous parallel activities, and the evaluation and choice of the abstracts. In addition, the organizers had to cope with a large number of “insecurities”: waiting for the acceptance of speaker requests from the preferable candidates or dealing with the unpredictable situation with regard to the swine flu (influenza A/ H1N1). Luckily the flu did not jeopardize the organization of the congress and a pandemic potential of swine flu did not occur as the Wonca Conference was well prepared with its special pandemic station.

Handling and reviewing the almost 1200 abstracts from Europe and all over the world posed an enormous challenge to SHW. Besides the web-based abstract database, the collaboration with three Wonca networks, Euract (teaching), EGPRN (research) and EQuIP (quality), worked very well. A supplement of the Swiss Medical Weekly (SMW) journal published in August, showed the abstracts divided up into workshops, oral presentations and posters. Our intention – together with the hosts of the Wonca Europe Conference 2009 such as SSMG/SGAM and the Association of Junior Family Doctors Switzerland (JHaS) – was to present a first class scientific programme to participants and speakers. After taking part in the Wonca Europe Conference 2009 you will hopefully leave with fond memories not only of the congress, but also of the city of Basel.

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