



Australian  
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# A practical guide for first time participants

1st SAFETYNET Scientific Conference 11-15  
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## Foreword

As hosts of the 1st SAFETYNET Scientific Conference in September 2023, we're delighted to welcome you to Canberra and The Australian National University, home of Australia's FETP. You're going to have a great time at the conference!

Thinking back to my very first international FETP Conference - the Joint INCLEN/FETP/IEA conference in Indonesia in 1992 - when I was a second year FETP student presenting on an Australia-wide outbreak of Norwalk-like gastroenteritis among airline travellers - I still vividly recall the apprehension I felt in the weeks leading up to the conference. We had to prepare our slide sets well in advance, no data projectors or last-minute changes, it all had to be finalised and sent to the photo lab to be printed on 35mm slides well before getting on the flight. Even after many practice sessions, it still felt pretty daunting to be speaking to a large international group.

In the lead up to this conference you may be feeling the same way. I can reassure you that the reception I got at that Conference left me with a real buzz! I was among a new group of friends; the mutual support was fantastic and has extended throughout my public health career. I'm confident you will get the same great experience for your presentations in Canberra - relax and enjoy the experience! We've produced this handy guide to help you get the most out of the 1st SAFETYNET Scientific Conference.

Prof Tony Stewart

Thanks Tony,

You're currently holding (or scrolling through) what we hope will be a useful guide for not only this conference or any other conference or professional networking activity you might be attending. This guide is intended for those attending their first conference but is also a good refresher of more seasoned conference goers. Here we will cover several different areas including what to wear, how to plan ahead, how to ask questions, how to network and how to have fun. We would like to thank you to Guddu Kaur, Emma Field, Matt Griffith, Amy Parry and Rezanur Rahaman for helping to put together this guide.

We wish you the best of luck,

The Conference Planning Committee

## Why conference?

Before we jump into the *how* of conferencing, it is worth understanding, *why* we conference. As academics, scientists, field workers, or government staff, we attend conferences for a few reasons. These include sharing knowledge, ideas and current work with peers, but it also includes growing professionally. Attending conferences, whether you are presenting or not, can also give you an opportunity to make new friends and to develop confidence in your professional self.

## Planning ahead

Attending a conference can feel a bit like preparing for battle for first time conference attendees. It can also feel like that for those that are more experienced amongst us. In preparation for the conference, look at the schedule in advance and plan out which sessions you want to attend- but do make sure to recheck once you arrive to ensure session times have not been changed. Be sure to attend the 'Brown Bag' or 'Interactive Learning Sessions' that most pique your interest. Also, be open to expanding your perspective; join something you would not normally join. You may get an idea or challenge your assumptions in ways you did not expect.

Here are some additional hints and tips from the conference committee about planning ahead:

- Give yourself time beforehand to book suitable accommodation that is within walking distance of the conference area or close to public transportation.
- Booking flights and applying for visas should also happen well in advance where feasible.
- Look out for any early conference registration discounts that may be available to you; they are an easy way to save some money.
- Review the whole agenda if available beforehand. Highlight the sessions you want to go to so you have a personal schedule.
- Be kind to the admin staff checking you in – they are often the best help throughout the conference.
- Arrive early on the first day to familiarise yourself with the space, calm any nerves and take a quiet moment for yourself.
- If you're presenting find the room, you will be presenting in ahead of time to avoid any last minute stress.

## Help! What do I wear to a conference?

Most conferences, including SAFETYNET and TEPHINET conferences will require you to dress professionally. This generally means business casual. While jeans are comfortable for many of us, avoid wearing them at a conference. You want to impress those around you with your brilliant ideas and dressing too casually might give them the wrong impression. It may also not be the ideal time to wear new shoes, new shoes often result in painful blisters. You want to feel comfortable in your clothes but make sure you look professional. Professional clothes vary across cultures, you can decide for yourself what mix of comfort and professional you want to present with based on where the conference is that you are attending. In many countries, the following is what would be expected:

**For men** this will generally mean trousers and a smart button up shirt. If you have one, bring a blazer or a suit jacket and wear a tie if you are presenting.

**For women** this will often mean a dress, or skirt/ trousers with a blouse.

## Name badges

Name badges feel awkward. Wear them anyway.

If your name is spelled incorrectly, don't be shy to have this corrected- your name is important. If you are worried your name is difficult for people to pronounce, you can ask for a phonetic version to be added underneath. Help people pronounce your name correctly if they don't get it right the first time. Again, your name is important.

Wearing a lanyard with your name clearly printed on it may not feel the most fashion forward but it will make it easier for people to start a conversation with you and for people to also remember your name. Wearing your name will also help people identify your name in the programme schedule and help attendees decide whether to attend your talk.

If the lanyard is too long and it sits in an awkward position on your body, tie a knot in the back, behind your neck, to make it sit higher. If the name tag keeps turning on to the wrong side, write your name on both sides so people can still read your name regardless of which side it falls on.

## Presenter tips and tricks

Attending international conferences can often already feel stressful but if you are presenting at a conference where communication is not in your mother tongue, it can feel even more stressful. Some tips and advice for those of you who are in this situation are below along with tips that all of us can benefit from;

- Prepare your presentation in advance and practice with someone you trust. This person may be able to notice things you have not, such as grammar and spelling. They may be helpful to ensure that the phrases you use are appropriate for your audience.
- Speak clearly and slowly, but loudly enough to be audible.
- If you feel especially nervous, breathing exercises may help to calm you down.
- Keep a bottle or glass of water with you on the podium if you are prone to getting a dry mouth during presentations.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse: It's true what your parents and teachers told you. There is no substitution for practice.
- Ask a colleague or friend to help think of possible questions you may be asked so you can prepare some set answers.
- Many people at the conference will also be concerned about their ability to communicate – even for native English speakers. The more you do this the more confident you will become over time.
- Don't be embarrassed if you have an accent – we all do.
- Arrive at your presentation location well ahead of time.
- And don't forget to breathe!

## Asking questions

The purpose of asking questions whether it be after an oral or poster presentation is always better understanding on the subject matter. Your questions should be succinct and rooted in a positive and helpful manner. Nobody likes negative and critical question thrown at them. Negative and unhelpful comments will most likely reflect badly on you, not the presenter. To help you out, here are some simple do's and don'ts for asking questions.

## Do

- Prepare your question thoughtfully. Write it down if you need to.
- Ensure your question is relevant.
- Introduce yourself briefly.
- Be respectful and kind to the speaker.
- Use simple language.
- Ask clear and concise questions.
- Be patient with the presenter if they stumble.
- Raise your hand during the Q&A section to ensure that you have a chance to ask your question.
- Ask one question at a time (remember the presenter is probably nervous and may not remember multiple or multi part questions).
- If the presenter does not understand your question help them by repeating the question slowly and rephrasing it.

## Don't

- Make a negative comment. This is especially when the comment does not give any practical or constructive advice.
- Monopolise the Q&A session.
- Be confrontational or rude.
- Interrupt others.
- Use the Q&A session to promote your own work.
- Tell a long story about your experience related (or unrelated) to the presentation. Save these for the conversations after.

## Example questions

Some example questions are:

1. *Can you please elaborate on the methods used for X,Y,Z?*
2. *Have you considered applying this approach in (x,y,z field)?*
3. *Your findings seem to challenge the current thinking in this area. Can you comment on the resistance and/or support you've faced?*
4. *Based on your research, what do you believe are the most significant implications for this area moving forward?*
5. *What do you think are the key areas that need further research?*
6. *Do you have any advice for any researchers or practitioners who might be looking to implement your recommendations in their daily work?*
7. *This was a very interesting study, can you discuss a little more on the generalisability of these findings?*
8. *Thank you for your presentation. Can you please tell me what you think the biggest public health impact has been from this study?*

## Silent audiences

Before we get into responding to questions, just some words of support from the committee. Whether you are a first-time presenter or whether you are a seasoned academic, facing a silent audience after presenting

can be unsettling. Try not to worry though. There are many reasons why audiences can be silent. Perhaps you have wowed your audience with your fantastic presentation and the audience needs some time to digest what you have told them. Perhaps it is day 4 and everyone is in information overload and cognitively slowing down, or perhaps you have unfortunately been scheduled just before lunch or mealtimes and attendees are desperate for some sustenance. Whatever the reason, don't take it personally. We've all faced a silent room before.

## Responding to questions

Being on the receiving end of a question can often be far more intimidating than being the one asking the question. Keep in mind that during presentations audiences are often absorbing information quickly and may not word all questions delicately or clearly. In these cases;

- It is ok to not know the answer.
- If the question is beyond the scope of your study – it's okay to say that.
- You are not expected to be an expert on all things related to your study.
- Try not to be offended by a poorly worded question.
- Respond in a clear and straightforward way.
- Try to be succinct with your responses. Having answers that are too long winded can often lose an audience.
- If you do not understand the question, you can try to reflect the question back to the asker or ask them to repeat it.
- You are allowed to say 'Sorry, I don't know the answer, but I'm happy to re-engage with you at a later time during/after the conference '

## Attend the keynote speeches

Keynote speeches are often given by high-profile speakers and can provide valuable insights into the industry or topic being discussed. As a result of the popularity of many speakers, seating might be limited in some cases. Arrive early to avoid sitting in the aisle. Follow up any resources, recommended books and websites that are mentioned. There is not always the opportunity to ask questions in these sessions, but if there is an opportunity and you have a question, follow our earlier tips in the 'Asking questions' section of this guide.

## Take notes

Bring a notebook or a laptop to take notes during the sessions. You can also use note-taking apps like Evernote, OneNote or even the notes app on your phone to keep notes on anything that sparks your interest. Who knows? It may inspire a paper later. Write down interesting quotes from the speaker. And if you wish, share through your social media so a broader audience can benefit from the insights as well.

## Networking Tips

Networking does not come naturally to all of us, and we all have our own styles – try not to compare to your friends and colleagues. Networking is just about connecting with someone. Different people and different cultures will have different approaches to this and what works for one person may not work for another. It is also worth looking around you. Many conference attendees go on to become key individuals in their respective Ministries of Health and public health institutes. Take a chance at this conference to establish a



relationship with those around you. You never know who you might need to call on who can help you with your country's public health problem in the future.

And with that, here are some practical tips to consider:

- **Be yourself:** When you are nervous it is hard to present yourself how you usually do. Accept the nerves and try to enjoy the conference as much as you can
- **Listen more, talk less:** Connecting with someone can be hard when you are doing all the talking. Try listening more.
- **Have business cards and ask for business cards:** Having a business card on hand is both helpful and practical even in today's digital age.
- **Follow up post conference:** If there is a fellow conference attendee whose work you admired and you managed to have a conversation with, follow up with an email or LinkedIn invite post conference.
- **Be kind:** This goes without saying, but I promise you it will never go out of style. Genuine kindness can go a long way in establishing networks and strong collaborations. Networking is good for you professionally but can also lead to genuine friendships.
- Invite someone for a coffee or tea.
- Approach the person sitting alone at breaks, or at least give them a welcoming smile so they know they are welcome to join you.
- If talking in a group/ circle, make room for people who may approach or be nearby.
- Ask people about their outbreak investigations, their research, their surveillance projects, their experience at a conference, whether they presented and how it went, whether they are yet to present and if they are nervous! Who knows, maybe you will be the smiling, nodding, encouraging person in their session.

## Visit the exhibition area

Many conferences have an exhibition area where companies display their products and services. Take some time to visit the exhibition area and learn about the latest trends and technologies in your industry. You might also get some free stuff to take home!

## Attend social events

Many conferences, as is the case with this year's SAFETYNET, have social events planned on some evenings. These might include cocktail hours or dinners. Attending these events can be a wonderful way to meet new people and connect with other conference attendees in a more relaxed environment. However social events after a day of conferencing are not everyone's cup of tea and that is also okay. For those of you who are looking to skip out on these after-hours activities, just note you might also miss some potential conversations that might lead to some great networking opportunities and future collaborations. For those of you who are my fellow introverts, socializing with people all day is exhausting at times but if you are willing to push yourself out of your comfort zone, you might find that you enjoy yourself.