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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Exploring the environmental sustainability of dermatology conferences

Dear Editor,

Environmental sustainability is an important consideration in medical events for organizers, exhibitors and delegates. The European Commission's Eco-Management and Audit Scheme introduced in 2005 provided guidance for organizing environmentally responsible events, promoting resource conservation, energy efficiency and waste minimisation.[1] The European Association of Dermatology and Venereology (EADV) and the British Association of Dermatologists (BAD) have set out environmental sustainability policies in delivering their scientific meetings.

As delegates we have observed examples of organizer-led initiatives that could impact on conference-related carbon footprint and promote dialogue in environmentally sustainable dermatology at the EADV Congress in Amsterdam in September 2024 and the BAD Annual Scientific Meeting in Liverpool in July 2024. These environmentally considerate initiatives included but are not limited to the offer of virtual attendance at the conferences, provision of recycling points, conference programmes and abstracts being available digitally and not in printed format and incorporation of planetary health sessions within their conference programme.

TABLE 1 The characteristics of samples received by delegates at three international dermatology conferences within one calendar year.

	EADV congress in October 2023[3,a]	BAD Annual Scientific Meeting in July 2024[b]	EADV congress in September 2024[a]
Number of cosmeceutical booth/exhibitors evaluated	15	10	7
Mean number of samples/products received by a delegate per booth/exhibitor	9.9 (range 3–21)	7.9 (range 1–17)	5.3 (range 1–12)
Mean total weight of samples/products received by a delegate per booth/exhibitor	0.64 kg (range 0.18–1.61)	0.5 kg (range 0.07–0.86)	0.71 kg (range 0.11–1.80)
Mean weight per sample/product	0.06 kg	0.06 kg	0.13 kg
Crude estimation of average carbon footprint of all samples/products received by a delegate per booth/exhibitor[c]	6.3 kgCO_2e (range 1.9–13.4)	5.1 kgCO_2e (range 0.64–10.88)	3.4 kgCO_2e (range 0.64–7.68)
Number of booth/exhibitor that did not provide any carrier bags	7% (1/15)	30% (3/10)	29% (2/7)
Number of booth/exhibitor offered to take back unwanted items	0% (0/15)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/7)
Average percentage of recyclable paper-based materials in relation to total weight of samples/products received	–	–	8.7%

Note: Exhibition booths featuring pharmaceutical drugs, medical devices or services were excluded. One booth/exhibitor may represent a single or multiple trading brands of a parent cosmeceutical company. Items were weighted using scientific weighting scales sensitive to the nearest 0.1 g. It is possible that other delegates received more, the same or fewer samples compared to our experience.

[a]European Association of Dermatology and Venereology Congress 2023 and 2024: One author visited each booth to collect samples.

[b]British Association of Dermatologists Annual Scientific Meeting 2024: Two authors independently visited each booth to collect samples, and the items were compared between authors. The average weight of the samples collected from each booth was calculated based on the two samples received.

[c]Due to the heterogeneity of the samples and the country of origin, we adopted a crude method of estimating the carbon footprint of products embedded in the manufacturing process, including the environmentally extended input–output analysis as per our previous report.[3] Product retail costs estimated at £5/€6 per item; pharmaceutical carbon factor 0.128 kgCO_2e per £1/€1.20 selected as these products can be used in both medical and cosmetic settings.

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The EADV Congress 2024 further offered reusable cups instead of single-use cups at water points, food donation and provision of public transport passes for registered delegates and exhibitors to promote the use of public transport. The BAD Annual Scientific Meeting 2024 offered speakers the option to deliver their talks virtually (if elected to do so) and it offered an annual Green Prize Award.

These are helpful steps towards sustainable dermatology conferences and there is certainly scope for organizers to share their implementation experience, work with exhibitors and delegates to make further improvements to meet best practice recommendations.[1–4] It is our experience that exhibitors are increasingly prepared to discuss their corporate environmental and social commitments when delegates initiate the conversation. One cosmeceutical exhibitor at the EADV Congress 2024 was noted to have a specific stand that invited delegates to explore and ask questions about their environmental and social commitments.

Exhibitors should be encouraged to engage in dialogue with delegates about progress in delivering their environmental, social and governance goals. This also provides an opportunity for delegates to encourage exhibitors to raise their environmental sustainability ambitions. Some delegates pondered the environmental sustainability of single-use coffee cups and the amount of small sample size products offered by some exhibitors at both conferences.

We conducted an environmental sustainability analysis of cosmeceutical samples received by delegates at both conferences using our previously published methodology[3] and we have further included selected data from the Berlin EADV Congress in October 2023, to facilitate data comparison (Table 1). Our findings suggested delegates at the EADV Congress 2024 received fewer items per booth/exhibitor but each sample/product was heavier in weight, resulting in a lower crude estimation of product carbon footprint embedded in the manufacturing process as compared to EADV Congress 2023 and BAD Annual Scientific Meeting 2024. Literature reports smaller samples have a less favourable ratio between carbon footprint/water consumption and utility as compared to full-size samples.[5] Thus, a shift away from smaller size samples towards full-size samples could potentially impact the environmental sustainability of exhibitors at conferences.

Our findings highlighted potential scope for exhibitors to optimize or reduce paper-based packaging and products given to delegates. However, our observations have limitations. We did not feel it appropriate to collect high volumes of samples from several exhibitors which would be extraneous to our needs; thus, our overall sample size was limited. We have not measured inter-rater variability of the volume and weight of samples received by delegates. The provision of product life cycle analysis data by exhibitors/manufacturers would be necessary to facilitate future accurate and equitable comparison of the ecological impact of samples. Opportunities for further reduction of delegate and exhibitors' environmental impact at conferences could include adopting digital alternatives such as QR codes to minimize the use of paper-based products[5] and donation of surplus products to charities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICAL APPROVAL
This study did not require formal approval of the IRB as we reported our personal experience.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Not applicable.

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