1st-time poster presenters offer tips on medical student research

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Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

Presenting a poster is mostly science, but it’s also art.

The recent Medical Student Poster Showcase, which took place during the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago, brought together more than 100 medical students last month to present research across a number of topics.

For medical students looking for an additional opportunity to showcase their research, the deadline for abstract submissions for the 2023 AMA Research Challenge—the largest national, multispecialty research event for medical students, residents and fellows, and international medical graduates—is July 11. In advance of that date, medical students presenting their first posters during the recent event at the AMA Meeting offered key insights on the lessons they learned.

Tell a story
Caleb Mahlen (right), a medical student from the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, presents his poster—“Optimizing Public Health Outcomes with an Age-Structured Model of COVID-19 Booster Vaccinations”—to attendees during the recent AMA Medical Student Poster Showcase.

A poster board doesn’t need hard data to have an impact.

While volunteering at a shelter in Kalamazoo, Michigan, second-year Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine student Ravi Trivedi noticed that children in the facility were often left without enrichment activities. To address that, Trivedi and classmate Jeff Nosek created an after-school program at the facility aiming to educate students on basic science concepts, share foundational knowledge about how science and health are intertwined, and spark an interest in medicine. The program holds weekly sessions that draw parents and children.
“The reason we wanted to present this poster is because we wanted to reach out to other medical students and see if this is something they wanted to recreate in their communities,” Trivedi said. “We were able to set up this entire teaching program in a year. So far we’ve seen really good progress with the kids really liking it and the parents at the shelters saying it’s really beneficial for their kids education.”

“We didn’t have as much hard data as a lot of other posters. What we did do is tell our story and put a road map out there of our experiences.”

Seek expert input

Four years ago, The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Medicine Office of Global Health helped institute a neonatal resuscitation training program to reduce neonatal mortality in low-resourced settings such as Kenya. After sitting through a presentation on the program, Ellena Privitera asked a natural follow-up: How well did it work?

The poster presented by Privitera, a second-year medical student at OSU College of Medicine, detailed retention of educators and health care workers who trained in the Helping Babies Breathe program. The findings indicated that most use the lessons learned on a frequent basis and share the teachings with colleagues.

Privitera is interested in global health, but as a first-time poster presenter she leaned on those who have demonstrated expertise in the field.

“I presented this to other global health researchers at Ohio State before doing this poster,” Privitera said. “There was some data that I chose to omit because they questioned the validity of it or they thought it might not fit with what our research objectives were. That feedback really helped me decide what to put on this poster.”

Keep it simple

While your research may be very in the weeds, your poster should be accessible.

Leah Rotenbakh, a fourth-year medical student at Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine in Auburn Hills, Michigan, presented research on radiation therapy tolerance in the treatment of breast cancer among carriers of the ataxia-telangiectasia mutant gene.
“The hardest part is taking this very complex topic and simplifying it. You want everybody to understand it, not just experts in a field.

“It’s very important to make your poster succinct and attention grabbing,” Rotenbakh said. “Now that I’m here looking around at all the other posters, I realize how little time you have to make an impression. Because of that I probably would have used more graphics to convey data if I did my poster again.”