4 things judges look for in medical poster presentations

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A group of AMA members, medical students, residents and fellows selected the top five poster presentations from the AMA Research Symposium this past December.

To get to five, the research symposium began with 1,000 submissions. Approximately 500 of which were selected for presentation in a virtual Research Symposium poster gallery. Of those, the top scored posters were featured in a poster competition and voted on by participants.

The final group of five posters represents the innovative thinking needed to drive medicine forward. The finalists cover a wide variety of topics, including the effects of electronic cigarettes, ventilator access during the pandemic and emotional intelligence in relation to burnout.

The next step in the process—the AMA Research Challenge—offers the five finalist the chance to present to a group of experts in medicine. The event will premiere on YouTube on Jan. 13 at 7 p.m. CT.

In advance of the contest, trainees may wonder, what does it take to create an award-winning poster? We asked Vineet Arora, MD, MAPP, one of the four judges for the AMA Research Challenge to offer her insight. In addition to judging the contest, Dr. Arora is assistant dean for scholarship and discovery at the University of Chicago’s Pritzker School of Medicine.

Research that resonates with you

Physicians aren’t experts in every aspect of care, so it’s very difficult to find something that will resonate with every judge, Dr. Arora said.

“I always say any topic can resonate as long as the relevance is explained well,” she said. “This is an important skill for all scientists, no matter what kind of science you are doing—bench to bedside to community. COVID-19 is a perfect example of how all aspects of science—from basic virology to
community and global health deployment of vaccine and public health interventions—are critical and relevant. So, the key aspect is whether and how the relevance is communicated to the audience.

**Show that your work matters**

Practical application is key to any effective body of research.

“I always look for rigor and impact in research,” Dr. Arora said. “I do want to say one caveat for student research is that often the rigor and impact is defined by the mentor so I also want to think about the rigor and impact of the student on the work. Can the student tell me what they did rigorously and how it was impactful? That is always impressive.”

**Keep your visuals clean**

When it comes to poster presentations, space is limited. One common trap some students fall into is overloading information.

“I subscribe to the POSTER, format which I modified from an old paper that I saw,” she said. “That acronym stands for plan ahead, organize visuals, select main message, tell the story, eliminate unnecessary text, and rehearse. If you include that method in your preparation you can see when there is a too-much-information problem in your presentation. It is important to review for just the text you need.”

**Your narrative needs to make sense**

The audio portion of your presentation, the words you are speaking, need to match your research. As a poster presenter you are, in essence, telling a story.

“People are auditory or visual learners but it can be dissonant to hear a presentation that does not match the visuals and vice-versa,” Dr. Arora said.