

JOURNEY OF ORGANIZING WPA THEMATIC CONGRESS

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How the Journey Started?

"Hey, Majid, why are you not taking any dessert?" asked Prof. Afzal Javed,¹ the President of World Psychiatric Association.

"No. Thank you, Sir. I want to maintain my weight," I answered. "You know there is another good strategy to control your weight. Why don't you organise a WPA Thematic Congress in Karachi!" intervened Prof. Nasar Sayeed Khan, a former President of Pakistan, Pakistan Psychiatric Society.²

This was almost two years ago in Lahore, while I was enjoying dinner in the company of these esteemed colleagues.

The next evening at the Fountain House Lahore³ dinner, the three of us had the same idea. This is how the seed for organising a WPA Thematic Congress in Karachi was planted.

The following day, we conducted an unofficial meeting to plan the first-ever WPA Thematic Congress in Karachi.

To think it all began there...!

Approval for Congress from the WPA

We approached the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)⁴ in September 2021 for advice and permission to host the WPA Thematic Congress in Karachi. In the next 2 months, a great deal of documentation and groundwork in Karachi made the permission possible in November 2021. Hence, receiving permission from the WPA to organise a Congress in Karachi, Pakistan, was a matter of immense pride. Prof. Afzal Javed and Prof. Nasar S. Khan are to be accredited for this significant achievement.

Therefore, with more momentous events come massive obligations and challenges. The approval process was indeed challenging, but it was just the beginning!

There were many more obstacles to overcome. On top of that, given the regional political and economic climate, it was quite challenging to deal with all of this.

Planning Phase:

Once the proposal to host the WPA Thematic Congress in Karachi was made, the next phase was to approach all the clinicians, psychologists, and academicians for the establishment of the several prerequisite committees for the event:

- Advisory Committee (International)
- Advisory Committee (Pakistan)
- Scientific Committee
- Organising Committee

The formation of the event's scientific committee was a formidable undertaking. It is widely regarded as Congress's core element. The prime duties of the scientific committee are to assess and approve the research papers to be presented at the congress. In this case, the expertise and supervision of Distinguished National Prof. Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Afridi, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society (JPPS),⁵ would be invaluable. He accepted to helm the scientific committee and guide all the members with his adept experience. With his endorsement, the formation of a scientific committee was effectively achieved.

Along with the aforementioned plans, the next step was the development of the congress website, as it would be the technological backbone and epicentre of the entire event. However, its design and launch are another tale to tell!

The next stage, after setting up the websites and relevant committees, was the scheduling and production of the media campaign (flyers, posters, social media, etc.) and programmes. This was another laborious task that required designing, formatting, and editing. It was challenging to respond to every query from every member in a timely manner. The programme went through several cycles of modifications in order to satisfy everyone who had signed up to take part.

Pre-Congress Seminar

On 17 March 2022, a pre-congress awareness seminar for the WPA Thematic Congress was held at the Hotel Marriott in Karachi. It was presided over by President WPA Afzal Javed, with a special appearance by Dr. Nasar Khan. They came all the way from the United Kingdom and Canada, respectively, just to attend this moot. The pre-congress seminar was attended by over 300 professionals and was greatly appreciated by all mental health fraternities. All the top-notch psychiatrists and mental health professionals were invited, who in turn showed their keen interest in the upcoming WPA Thematic Congress. The website⁶ of the congress was launched there, but it was just the beginning, and there was still a long way to go.

Scientific Committee Meetings

The first meeting of the Scientific Committee was held on March 17, 2022, at the Hotel Marriott in Karachi. This was then followed by a monthly meeting to monitor the progress of the work. The main objective of the scientific committee was to review and select from among the 15-20 initially proposed workshops and training courses, plus over 100 original papers. We eventually ended up with more than 50 workshops out of 300 submissions, over 200 original research articles, and more than one hundred scientific sessions at the congress. This is perhaps the highest number of scientific sessions at any medical congress in the history of Pakistan.



Our primary goal was to solicit national and international speakers from all over the globe to deliver invited lectures, keynote talks, state-of-the art lectures, and plenary sessions. The scientific committee then contacted eminent psychiatrists, researchers, and academicians, who responded positively. An impressive amount of advocacy was done in this regard by Prof. Afzal Javed and Prof. Nasar Sayeed Khan. They played a paramount role in approaching the international speakers and convincing them to participate in this Congress.

In addition to inviting foreign speakers, gathering national speakers and gaining their approval was another significant challenge. Every day, hundreds of emails, texts, and phone calls would flood in for the submission of lectures and research to this conference. It was definitely an arduous assignment to formulate the programme, but thanks to Prof. Afridi and the members of the scientific committee who actually materialised it. Thus, an enormous sigh of relief is in order. No doubt it was a hard job. Phew!

The Venue and Delegates' Accommodation

Another essential responsibility was the arrangement of the scientific sessions and accommodations for speakers at a secure venue, while negotiating a cost-effective package with the hotel. Given the fluctuating foreign exchange rates, especially those of the US Dollar, this was a particularly hard job, as hotels keep increasing their rates throughout the course of time.

Special Issue of JPPS

This Congress will be a global gathering of experts in the field of mental health, thus we set out to find the finest souvenirs possible to give away as mementos of the Congress. The Pakistan Psychiatric Society⁷ is commemorating the occasion with a "Special Edition of JPPS" and an "e-Book of Congress Abstracts."

Fellowship Travel Award for Postgraduate Trainees

A bonus feature of the WPA Karachi Congress is the competition for the Fellowship Awards for trainee psychologists, trainee psychiatrists, and undergraduate medical students. We received an overwhelming response from trainees across the country. A panel of judges was constituted, who drew results transparently according to the WPA rules. Finally, 20 winners are getting a chance to receive a travel stipend, hotel accommodations, and a registration waiver. Cash prizes for the first, second, and third positions will be awarded in the concluding session of the congress.

Communication with the Pharmaceutical Industry

The dialogue with pharmaceutical companies in order to receive sponsorship for the congress was a unique task. In Pakistan, it is common practice to invest in a doctor who will only return the investment with business. In general, supporting highly prestigious academic activities is not a priority.

However, I was fortunate to receive sponsorship grants from numerous visionary national pharmaceutical companies that stood by the Congress Secretariat to support this academic moot. On the other hand, there were a few companies that tried to convince me of the profits they hoped to receive in return for their investment in the Congress, and many of them are still waiting to meet again.

Consequently, after much effort and correspondence, I was able to secure collaboration with some pharmaceutical companies that agreed to sponsor this congress in good faith.

Approaching Chief Guests

The WPA Thematic Congress is the first international congress to be held in Karachi, and it is hoping for state support. The plan to contact the country's President, Honorable Dr. Arif Alvi, and invite him to the congress was put into action. Additionally, the Federal State Minister for Health, Honorable Dr. Mahesh Kumar Malani, and the Honorable Chief Minister of Sindh, Mr. Syed Murad Ali Shah, were also invited for the inaugural and concluding sessions, if their schedules allowed.

Salient Features of the WPA Thematic Congress Karachi 2023

The event will comprise:

- Six plenary lectures by top-notch mental health professionals
- Several keynote lectures by thematic presenters and invited lectures by topic specialists
- Multiple state-of-the-art lectures by international and national presenters
- Over 200 original research papers in oral and poster presentation sessions
- Special sessions by the British-Pakistani Psychiatric Association
- Special sessions on the psychiatry-neurology interface and psycho-social rehabilitation
- Over 45 workshops and training courses
- Panel discussions on important issues
- Fellowship Travel Awards and Special Sessions for post-trainee psychiatrists, trainee psychologists and undergraduate medical students

Performance by Intellectually Challenged Children

For the inaugural dinner and Social evening, we have included a musical programme for children with intellectual disabilities. The Karachi Vocational Training Centre (KVTC)⁸ was asked to organise the programme for the mentally disabled children in their care, and they graciously accepted.



The Execution Phase

Now that the execution has begun, I pray that everything goes well, and that it helps Pakistan gain a higher scholarly reputation worldwide. I would like to welcome all the delegates and participants to join hands to make this academic event a remarkable success, not only for Karachi, Pakistan but also for the Global Mental Health Fraternity.

Kindly forgive me for any shortcomings. I hope this congress will pave the way for the WPA World Congress to be hosted in Pakistan soon. Ameen!

Disclosure

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