

Atlantic City is passé — I'm betting on Chicago

Jonathan Epstein

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Personal perspective

I have news for the older generation who regale us with tales of presenting before the giants in Atlantic City. Pronouncements regarding the demise of such encounters are premature. The giants now convene in Chicago, but they are just as imposing.

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achieve these goals. Physician-scientists are too valuable to this society not to do otherwise.

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I have news for the older generation who regale us with tales of presenting before the giants in Atlantic City. Pronouncements regarding the demise of such encounters are premature. The giants now convene in Chicago, but they are just as imposing.

My first ASCI meeting as a member was in Chicago in 2001. I was absolutely thrilled to have been elected and eager to attend. I presented a poster on neural crest contribution to the cardiovascular system, and I arrived at the poster session a few minutes late. I was shocked to find Dan Foster, Joe Goldstein, and Michael Brown examining my data. They were pointing at figures and arguing about some point or other. My first reaction was to turn away and to disappear into the crowd. I summoned my courage, however, and introduced myself. Without further formality, I was subjected to a withering dual-barreled barrage of skepticism and inquiry from Goldstein and Brown. I had supposed that their interests were limited to cholesterol and lipid metabolism, and I was surprised at their interest in my work and detailed knowledge of the field. I couldn't believe that I was engaged in data analysis with Goldstein and Brown — and it was my data! Eventually, Bill Kelley arrived. He had recruited me to Penn five years earlier, and he casually (but loudly) commented to Dan Foster that Goldstein and Brown were “taking a little too much interest” in my work.

They were all, of course, operating with ulterior motives. R. Sanders (Sandy) Williams had recently stepped down as chief of Cardiology at UT Southwestern to become dean at Duke. Within a few months, I was visiting Dallas to interview for his prior position, and Goldstein and Brown welcomed me to town. It happened to be September 11, 2001, and I had dinner with Don Seldin and Dan Foster that night in Dallas as we all digested the change that the world had undergone that day.

The UT Southwestern offer was not the only opportunity for me that began because of a connection or a conversation at the ASCI meetings. While most of us no longer present our first abstract or finest unpublished data at the combined meetings, they remain

the most concentrated focus of academic leadership available to the up-and-coming physician-scientist. At every turn, I have found myself rubbing elbows with those I had only read about, or heard about, during my training. As a place to seek advice or inspiration — or a job — these meetings remain unsurpassed.

I have attended the meetings each year since 2001. There is uniqueness and purpose to these meetings that goes beyond networking and reuniting with old friends. The yearly gathering helps me to appreciate the fascination and inquisitiveness that all members share. I am frequently struck by the common threads that unite research areas, which have grown so subspecialized and independent that we often fail to even hear about the latest results outside of our field until we read about them in the lay press. The meetings never fail to leave me once more impressed with the importance and potential of the well-rounded physician-scientist. I cannot think of another conference or event that takes its place in this regard. Although new primary data are now only rarely presented at the oral sessions (though the ASCI Council is changing that), a review of the past three years' agendas reveals an astounding compendium of scientific advance and excellence (Table 1): six Nobel laureates, four Lasker awardees, seventeen members of the National Academy of Sciences, nineteen members of the Institute of Medicine, and a broad range of discovery to inspire the next generation.

The giants remind us that the Tri-Societies meetings were once able to assemble nearly all of academic medicine, providing an unparalleled forum for presenting and discussing new findings. This was possible because academic medicine was far smaller than it is today. In 1960, the number of faculty members in the largest departments of medicine averaged well under 100, sometimes under 20, and the NIH provided about \$200 million in research grants annually — compared with over \$20 billion today. Successful physician-scientists today, such as those inducted into the ASCI, must compete with a far larger and more advanced group

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**Table 1**

A selection of ASCI/AAP speakers, 2005–2007

Speaker	IOM	NAS	Nobel	Lasker	Title of talk at ASCI meeting
Agre, Peter	X	X	X		Aquaporin water channels: from atomic structure to clinical medicine (2005)
Brown, Michael	X	X	X		One mentor or two? (2005)
Collins, Francis S.	X	X			Harnessing the power of the genome for translation (2006), ASCI Award Lecture (2005)
Coughlin, Shaun	X	X			Protease-activated receptors: medicine to science and back (2006)
Druker, Brian J.	X	X			Imatinib as a paradigm of molecularly targeted cancer therapy (2006)
Evans, Ronald M.		X		X	Nuclear receptors at the crossroads of inflammation and metabolism (2006)
Fauci, Anthony	X	X			Kober Medal (2007), Seasonal and pandemic influenza: scientific and public health challenges (2006)
Feldmann, Marc				X	Why is TNF- α such a good therapeutic target? (2006)
Friedman, Jeffrey	X	X			Leptin and the neural circuit regulating body weight and metabolism (2006)
Goldstein, Joseph L.	X	X	X	X	The metabolic syndrome: a vicious cycle unleashed by genes and diet (2005)
Jameson, J. Larry	X				Battle of the sexes: recent insights into sex determination (2007)
Kelley, William N.	X				Kober Medal (2005)
Lander, Eric S.	X	X			Genomics and the future of medicine (2007)
Lefkowitz, Robert J.	X	X			Kober Lecture: Seven-transmembrane receptors (2006)
Nathan, David G.	X				Kober Medal (2006)
Prusiner, Stanley		X	X	X	Prions, neurology, and science (2005)
Schreiber, Stuart		X			Small molecules, ChemBank, and cancer (2005)
Seidman, Christine	X	X			Gene mutations in cardiac hypertrophy: rare events or a common etiology? (2006)
Sharp, Phillip A.	X	X	X		The surprising biology of short RNAs (2005)
Varmus, Harold E.	X	X	X		Micro RNAs: functional studies and therapeutic implications (2007)
Weissman, Irving L.	X	X			Stem cells, normal and neoplastic (2006)
Yamada, Tadataka	X				Perspectives on global health (2007)
Zerhouni, Elias	X				NIH: State of the agency. Challenges and opportunities (2007), The impact of new technologies on biomedical research (2005)

IOM, Institute of Medicine; NAS, National Academy of Sciences; Nobel, Nobel laureate; Lasker, Lasker awardee.

of basic and clinical scientists than did our predecessors. Nevertheless, the total number of annual ASCI inductees has remained relatively constant, and the quality remains outstanding. It is perhaps an even greater honor today to be named by colleagues to join the ASCI than ever before in the Society's 100-year history. While the growth and expansion of biomedical research has altered the nature of the annual meetings themselves, it has not diminished the significance of the professional recognition associated with the annual event.

Actually, 2001 was not my first ASCI meeting. In the late 1960s and early '70s I went along with my parents each May to Atlantic City. I too have fond memories of those spring trips. The expansive Boardwalk with amusement parks and cotton candy were mesmerizing. There was the biggest Ferris wheel I had ever seen, and we always returned with boxes of delicious and precious saltwater taffy. At the time, I was far more impressed with the glamorous photos of Miss America that lined the hallways of Haddon Hall,

where the pageant was held each year, than I was with the leaders of American medicine.

I returned to Atlantic City this year and once again strolled down the Boardwalk in search of saltwater taffy. I was disappointed to find the city dilapidated and out of date, with an air of desperation surrounding the glitzy casinos. The Ferris wheel was still there, but it was rather small and unimpressive, and I wondered if it had ever been the giant of my memory. The saltwater taffy was still good, but all in all, the food is better in Chicago.

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