

How a Medical Society Decides to Cancel a Meeting

Ellie Kincaid

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Leadership of the Society of Interventional Radiology (SIR) had decisions to make. Like any healthcare organization, they had been monitoring news of cases of the novel coronavirus since it first spread outside of China.

First, they had to evaluate whether to attend other societies' professional conferences as they'd planned. SIR Executive Director Susan E. Sedory, MA, CAE, was supposed to go to the Asia Pacific Society of Cardiovascular and Interventional Radiology meeting in Taipei the first weekend of March. On February 6th, its organizers [announced](#) they would postpone the meeting.

Soon, the decisions hit closer to home.

On February 28, the Washington State Department of Health [announced two new cases](#) in the Seattle area, one apparently from community spread. SIR's own 2020 meeting was scheduled for March 28 through April 2 in Seattle. It was time to evaluate the status of their own meeting.

To date, more than [two dozen medical societies](#) worldwide have canceled, postponed, or converted their meetings to virtual presentations because of coronavirus concerns. SIR's experience provides a window into how those decisions are being made.

Key Variables

"Medical meetings have a unique challenge at this time," Sedory told *Medscape Medical News*. "Medical professionals certainly can't look like we're making decisions like this frivolously. We don't want to contribute to hysteria or panic, and we want to keep away from any sense of disinformation, because there's still a lot unknown" about the current coronavirus outbreak.

Sedory and her staff convened a special meeting with officers of the meeting organizing committee, the programming committee, and some others to set the groundwork for how they'd make a decision to cancel the meeting. On the conference call, they outlined a decision tree of key variables that would affect their thinking.

"We knew we needed to make the right decision for our patients, our colleagues and our communities," SIR President Laura Findeiss, MD, FSIR, told *Medscape Medical News* in an emailed statement.

One factor: Whether the city of Seattle shut down because of the virus. Another, given that many medical centers were issuing mandates restricting their employees' work-related travel, was the quality of the meeting and the overall experience SIR could deliver to those who came.

They also took a step back to "think about what was the responsible thing to do," Sedory said. "You're bringing the entirety of a medical profession, give or take, together to learn and then sending them back home."

"Everything we know and everything the CDC [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and the WHO [World Health Organization] have told us to date about fighting this now-pandemic has been focused on limiting social interactions and avoiding large groups," Findeiss said.

Another factor many professional societies face is the specter of large cancellation fees from the hotels and convention centers they'd booked for their meetings. The bill could come within 24 hours after cancellation and be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars or even seven figures, Jeffrey S. Tenenbaum, managing partner of Tenenbaum Law Group in Washington, DC, told *Medscape Medical News* in an email.

Event cancellation insurance, if a society has it, may not cover the coronavirus outbreak as a reason for cancellation, according to a [document](#) posted to the website of the American Society of Association Executives. "To our knowledge at this time, providers of event cancellation insurance consider the Coronavirus COVID-19 a pre-existing condition, and it is therefore excluded from event cancellation policies from late January 2020 onward," the document states.

On Wednesday, March 4, the public health authority of Seattle and King County [announced new recommendations](#) to reduce residents' risk for exposure to COVID-19. "This is a critical moment in the growing outbreak of COVID-19 in King County and these measures can potentially impact the spread of the disease," the announcement read.

Among the recommendations: "If you can feasibly avoid bringing large groups of people together, consider postponing events and gatherings."

All official recommendations SIR was considering, from the local Seattle public health department to the CDC to the WHO and other medical institutions, were pointing in the same direction, Sedory said.

There was still a lot of uncertainty. But the society needed to act.

"Necessary Decision"

"You get to the point where you know the things that are uncertain are not going to become certain, but you need to decide anyway," Sedory said. "That is the challenge of leadership, knowing when more information is probably not going to arrive, not in a way that's going to make it easy for you."

Seven SIR staff members and 12 physicians who are leaders in the organization dialed into the last of three conference calls convened in the last week to deliberate the meeting's status.

"As interventional radiologists, making a decision as a group felt very familiar to us since we work collaboratively in teams a lot in our professional lives," Findeiss said. "I'm sure that our professional experiences of collaborating and advocating for patients in high-intensity environments gave us the ability in this situation to absorb and analyze data quickly and effectively to make a correctly timed decision."

On March 6th, SIR announced their decision to cancel.

"We really feel like we made, clearly, a difficult but necessary decision when we did this, and hopefully that will allow us to find the best recovery forward," Sedory said. "It is disappointing, make no mistake about it."

Given the size and requirements of the meeting, postponing it to a later date in Seattle wasn't an option. SIR represents roughly 8000 professionals in the field of interventional radiology and drew more than 5000 attendees to its 2019 meeting in Austin, Texas. SIR has never canceled a meeting in the 9 years Sedory has been there.

Now, she and her team are trying to figure out what else SIR can do to fill the void of the canceled meeting. Ideas have come up to continue the programming digitally, and they'd like to find a way to recognize various awardees, conduct the governing business that happens at meetings, and help people feel connected to the exhibit hall and community. "We know people aren't just coming for CME credits, they're coming because of the community and how they support each other," Sedory said.

"It's kind of a 'life goes on' message," Sedory said. "This will be the year we remember for this."

Ellie Kincaid is Medscape's associate managing editor. She has previously written about healthcare for Forbes, the Wall Street Journal, and Nature Medicine.

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