The 54th Annual American Academy of Neurology (AAN) meeting

The 54th AAN meeting was held this year in Denver, Colorado. Although slightly less tempting on paper than next year’s venue, namely Honolulu, the “mile-high” town of Denver provided a more than adequate state-of-the-art conference centre for the 8000 or so delegates from around the world. Founded last century on the back of an abortive gold rush, Denver itself came across as a rather uninspiring place although the picturesque Rockies and associated upmarket ski resorts provided a diverting and impressive backdrop. The altitude together with an action-filled social agenda and, of course, the all-American breakfast seminars combined to produce a week of chronic sleep deprivation and a surreal sense of constant mild hangover (as if!).

The AAN meeting is widely held to be the most important neurology event in the calendar and rightly so. This was my first attendance at such a meeting and it was difficult not to be impressed, if not overawed, by its sheer scale and professionalism. Comparisons with the ABN equivalent in this country would approximate to likening Ben Hur to a donkey derby on Margate sands.

The meeting itself can be divided into three components – the plenary sessions, the scientific programme combining oral presentations and posters, and the educational programme. Dealing with the latter first, this is perhaps the signature aspect of the AAN with almost 200 seminars available from 6:45 in the morning to 11:00 at night over the course of 7 days. Topics were reassuringly broad and included tempting titles such as “Autism across the ages” and “Top ten ophthalmological diagnoses you cannot afford to miss”. My experience of several educational sessions and feedback from colleagues would suggest that the quality is unusually high with each course providing a comprehensive written syllabus to show the folks back home. Veterans tell me that the trick is to attend a course as far away from one’s areas of interest as possible in order to maximise the learning potential. However, depending on one’s level of sponsorship, the associated financial gamble might well limit this approach, given that the courses are far from cheap with a price tag ranging from $120 to $600. A popular but again expensive ($200) option was to purchase a CD-ROM containing the text of all educational seminars – if only one had the time to actually read it all! The educational programme clearly brings considerable renumeration to the AAN. Speaking as a purist, one gripe I have of the meeting would be that this is a faithful model of a neurodegenerative disease. This impressive type of research leads one to suspect, optimistically, that it can only be a matter of years before we fully understand the fundamental molecular basis of these various neurodegenerative diseases. The scientific sessions of the meeting were perhaps the least satisfying aspect. This is perhaps not surprising since one is usually already aware of recent significant findings in one’s own areas of interest whereas new developments in other areas tend either to be totally incomprehensible or, at best, difficult to appreciate. It is, of course, impossible to summarise the diverse work that was presented although the recent cumulative data is starting to look persuasive. It is worth recalling, perhaps cynically, however, that all these studies are funded by the respective interested pharmaceutical companies.

Overall, my experience of the annual AAN meeting was very positive. The size of the meeting and the choice of sessions on offer can easily lead to a sense of disorientation. If I am lucky enough to attend next year’s show (any offers?), I feel that my experience of the Denver meeting will allow me to hone in on the really relevant areas to my practice and interests and might be even more worthwhile.