



Looking Forward to the First MDS Virtual Congress

- Vincenzo Bonifati, MD, PhD; Chair, MDS Congress Scientific Program Committee
- Oscar Gershanik, MD; Chair, MDS International Congress Oversight Committee
- Claudia Trenkwalder, MD, FEAN; MDS President, 2019-2021
on behalf of the MDS Virtual Congress 2020 Task Force

This year, for the first time ever, the MDS International Congress goes virtual, and will be open to healthcare professionals across the globe, with an exciting program of more than 30 hours of research updates, teaching courses, video sessions, sponsored symposia, virtual exhibits, and more than 1600 accepted abstracts on a broad range of topics related to Parkinson's disease and the other Movement Disorders. The meeting theme this year is *"The Combined Multidisciplinary Approach to Movement Disorders"*.



As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Society made the strategic decision to go virtual with the full program, to continue to fulfil its mandates of disseminating knowledge, promote research and ultimately improve the management of patients with movement disorders worldwide. After launching, from September 12-16, 2020, the entire program will be available on demand for free, until October 1, 2020, for those who have registered by September 16, 2020. After October 1, 2020, the program will remain available on demand for the MDS members, for a limited time.

Transforming a large and complex event, such as our International Congress, into a virtual event is a big challenge; therefore, a special task force - the MDS Virtual Congress 2020 Task Force – was created, co-chaired by MDS President, Claudia Trenkwalder, together with the Chair of the International Congress Oversight Committee, Oscar Gershanik, and the Chair of the Congress Scientific Program Committee (CSPC), Vincenzo Bonifati. Other members include MDS President-Elect, Francisco Cardoso, the CSPC Co-Chair, Andrew Siderowf, the CSPC Past-Chair, Buz Jinnah, the Chair of the 2020 Congress Local Organizing Committee, Matthew Stern, the MDS Treasurer, Louis Tan, and the Chair of the MDS Young Members Group, Margherita Fabbri. Together with the MDS International Secretariat, we have been working very hard over the past few months, and are still continuing to do so, to provide our community with the best possible Congress, despite these difficult times.

The program will feature most of the classic and popular sessions from the International Congress, including the Presidential Session with the Marsden and Fahn Awards lectures and the Junior Awards, the MDS Video Challenge, the Controversies, and the Highlights Sessions, as well as the Therapeutic Plenary Sessions, several Scientific Plenary and Parallel Sessions, Special Topics, Teaching Courses, Video Sessions, and Skills Workshops. Two non-CME 'Science of Industry' Sessions are scheduled again this year, after the success of the 2019 edition. During each session, pre-recorded lectures will be launched. A chat will be available for the attendees to ask questions to the Faculty. The Chairs will collect these questions and select the most relevant to be asked to the faculty during a question and answer "live" segment at the end of each session.

Each year, the CSPC strives to put together the best program possible, including the hottest topics and the best faculty, while at the same time promoting as much as possible the young members, and respecting the gender balance and the representativeness of the geographical diversity of MDS. This year, the Virtual Congress includes 61 scientific sessions, with 190 Faculty from 37 countries, and a high number of young Faculty who have not spoken before at this Congress, of women, and of colleagues from Asia, Oceania, South America, and Africa.

In addition, we are proud to announce some new features, specially intended to further enhance the scientific excellence of our congress, and inspire the current and the next generation of movement disorders professionals. In a new Plenary Session, called "Neuroscience Bridges", two world-renowned neuroscientists will provide overviews of their cutting-edge research. With this keynote lecture, our Society provides special recognition to pioneering researchers, while offering our community the opportunity to meet prominent scientists, who would not usually attend the International Congress.

We also intend to give more emphasis to excellence in the original research data presented each year to the Congress by our-own community. All accepted abstracts will be available in a Virtual Poster Hall for the entire duration of the Virtual Congress, and a selection of the highly-scored abstracts will be illustrated during sixteen virtual Guided Poster Tours. Furthermore, 18 Top Abstracts, chosen among those that received the highest scores from the CSPC, will be presented during some of the Parallel sessions of the Congress, after the invited lectures. The work of 18, hopefully young colleagues, will therefore be honoured with a very large visibility, and those fellows will have an opportunity to gain experience and join more established Faculty in a large oral session.

The impact of the COVID-19 on our patients with Parkinson's disease and other Movement Disorders, as well as on the way we manage our patients in these challenging times, will be the subject of a dedicated Parallel Session, as well as several Posters.

Some structural changes were also necessary to profile the virtual format of the Congress for a global attendance. The duration of the whole event will take place within five days, from Saturday, September 12 to Wednesday September 16, plus the Welcome Ceremony on Friday, September 11. However, compared to the traditional in-person editions of the International Congress, the duration of each day will be shorter, and more sessions presented concurrently, including some of the scientific Plenary Sessions. In addition, all sessions will remain available "on demand" during the following days, therefore, nothing should be missed by anyone. On the contrary, we expect the virtual format to allow each of us to benefit from more content compared to the in-person experience, with the additional advantage that we can enjoy our preferred sessions while sitting at home on the couch, and perhaps with a good drink and a snack!

A virtual congress with a global attendance has also the challenge of the different time zones over the world. Some sessions, namely the Therapeutic Plenary and the Video Challenge, will be launched a second time (encore sessions), with different Chairs, to be viewed by our colleagues in the Eastern hemisphere at times that are most convenient for them.

Perhaps the most important aspect is that the virtual format, open for free, represents an unprecedented educational opportunity for the thousands of colleagues, practising clinicians, allied health professionals, researchers, residents, and undergraduate students, who are living in underdeveloped and underserved areas of the world, and who could not afford the costs of traveling to attend an in-person International Congress. This is a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have profound, paradoxically beneficial implications for the dissemination of knowledge and the growth of the movement disorders community across the globe, and these implications might go beyond the 2020 edition of the Congress. For a long time, the Society has been intent in providing free access to membership and educational content and activities to as many colleagues as possible. Free access to the MDS Virtual Congress 2020 is another example of the path we have chosen and showcases the Society's mission and goals.

While the dates of the 2020 Congress approach, the preparations for the 2021 Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark are already ongoing. Which format the 2021 Congress will have remains largely unpredictable at this junction. The good thing is that we learned a lot and gained experience in the preparations for the 2020 meeting. We are still considering all options, and are prepared for all of these, ranging from the traditional in-person format (which appears unlikely, given the current status of the COVID-19 pandemic), to once again a fully virtual 2021 Congress, or perhaps an hybrid format with a limited in-person local gathering, combined with a global Virtual Congress.

Last, let us express our deepest gratitude to the members of the CSPC, who developed the 2020 scientific sessions, and who are currently serving as liaisons with the faculty to ensure each session is best harmonised and meets its learning objectives; the Speakers and Chairs, who accepted the additional, time-consuming task to pre-record their lectures and contributions; the entire MDS International Secretariat, and particularly, Kate Hausner, Congress Program Manager, Jenny Quebbeman, Director of Meetings, and Jennie Socha, Executive Director, for a truly amazing amount of highly professional work and dedication.

We hope to meet all of you at our first Virtual Congress, and that you will find it enjoyable, useful and inspiring!