

## First virtual uro-oncology meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic: 10th Online Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress

COVID-19 pandemisi döneminde ilk online üroonkoloji kongresi: 10. Online Avrasya Üroonkoloji Kongresi

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### Özet

**Amaç:** COVID-19 hızlıca yayılarak kısa sürede tüm dünyayı etkileyen bir pandemi haline gelmiş ve bu süreçte koruyucu önlemler nedeniyle birçok bilimsel kongre ve eğitim toplantısı iptal edilmek zorunda kalmıştır. Bu çalışmada, ilk canlı, online kongre deneyimimizi paylaşmayı, yüz yüze geleneksel kongreden online kongreye geçiş sürecini anlatmayı ve katılımcı ve konuşmacıların memnuniyetlerini ortaya koymayı amaçladık.

**Gereç ve Yöntemler:** Avrasya Üroonkoloji Derneği (AÜD), 10. Avrasya Üroonkoloji Kongresi'ni Haziran 2020'de Şanlıurfa-Göbeklitepe, Türkiye'de düzenlemeye karar vermişti. Ancak organizasyon komitesi COVID-19 pandemisi nedeniyle Türkiye'deki ilk online kongreyi düzenlemeye karar verdi. Planlanan kongre süresi 4 günden 2 güne düşürüldü ve her konuşmacının sunumlarını ZOOM programı (San Jose, CA) üzerinden yapmaları planlandı.

**Bulgular:** Toplam 704 kişi kongreye kayıt yaptırdı. Bu sayı ile AÜD tarafından düzenlenen tüm kongreler arasında en fazla katılımcı sayısına sahip kongre bu kongre oldu. Kongrede 199 sözlü sunum, 25 interaktif e-poster ve 12 video sunumu yer aldı. Kongre süresince her katılımcı ortalama 387 dakika kongreye katıldı. Katılımcıların çoğunluğunun sunulan programdan oldukça memnun olduğu tespit edildi. Katılımcıların genel olarak görüntü ve ses kalitesinden, sohbet fonksiyonundan, soru-cevap bölümünden ve teknik destekten oldukça memnun olduğu saptandı.

### Abstract

**Objective:** COVID-19 has rapidly spread and has become a pandemic by affecting the whole world. During this period, many scientific congresses and educational meetings had to be canceled because of preventive measures. In this report, we aimed to share our first live virtual congress experience, described its process of transformation from face to face to virtual congress and report the attendees and speakers' satisfaction.

**Material and Methods:** Eurasian Uro-oncological Association (EUA) decided to organize the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology congress in June 2020 at Göbeklitepe, Şanlıurfa in Turkey. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizing committee decided to organize the first virtual scientific congress in Turkey. The planned duration of the congress was reduced from 4 days to 2 days and each speaker was planned to give the speech online during the presentation via ZOOM program (San Jose, CA).

**Results:** A total of 704 persons registered to the congress. It was the highest number of participants among whole congresses that was organized by EUA. In this congress, there were 199 oral presentations, 25 interactive e-posters and 12 video presentations. During the congress, each participant attended the congress for an average of 387 minutes. It was identified that the majority of the participants were quite satisfied with the program offered. In general, participants were fairly satisfied with the quality of images and sound, chat functionality, questions & answers section and technical support.

**Sonuç:** Bu makalede, Türkiye'deki ilk online kongre deneyimimizin sonuçlarını 10. Avrasya Üroonkoloji Kongresi ile sunduk. Günümüzde online kongreler "yeni normal" haline gelmiş durumdadır ve ev konforunda daha fazla katılımcı ile daha az maliyetli etkinlikler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** COVID-19, kongre, sanal, pandemi, online

**Conclusion:** In this report, we shared the outcomes of our first virtual congress experience in Turkey through the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress. Today, virtual congresses have become the "new normal" and offer cheaper events with larger participation in the comfort of home.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, congress, virtual, pandemic, online

## INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, multiple cases of pneumonia with unknown etiology were detected in Wuhan City, China and then a new type of coronavirus was isolated on January 7, 2020. This new disease was called as COVID-19 (1). COVID-19 has rapidly spread and become an epidemic in throughout China. Thereafter, this disease that has spread rapidly all over the world was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. On the same date, The Ministry of Health of Turkey announced that the first COVID-19 case was seen in Turkey. From the first day to date, a total of nearly 25 million cumulative cases have been seen in all over the world (2). Plenty of preventive measures have been taken by health authorities or local governments such as quarantine procedures and isolation, social distancing, international/intercity travel restrictions and cancellation of crowd organizations. During these times, many scientific congresses and educational meetings had to be canceled.

The Eurasian Uro-oncological Association (EUA) is a member-based organization which aimed to ensure that urologists and residents meet, cooperate and communicate, increase their knowledge and skills and keep them up to date in the field of uro-oncology. Up to 2020, the association organized 9 scientific congresses in the field of uro-oncology and planned to organize the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress in Göbeklitepe, Şanlıurfa in Turkey in June 2020. However, due to the pandemic, it was not possible to hold this congress face to face and the organizing committee (OC) decided to organize the congress live virtual. In this report, we aimed to share our first live virtual congress experience, describe its process of transformation from face to face to virtual congress and report the attendees and speakers' satisfaction and outcomes.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The OC decided to organize the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology congress in June 2020 at Göbeklitepe, Şanlıurfa in Turkey. The 9th Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress was held with the 39th Congress of the Societe Internationale d-Urologie (SIU) in Athens, Greece. After the 9th EUA congress, OC started to plan immediately the congress' venue, calendar and scientific program of the 10th congress. OC planned to organize an in person attendance congress with 4 international and 88 local speakers. Scientific presentations at 4 halls, live surgeries and face to face courses were planned for 4 days duration.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the OC had to take an important decision. The congress would either be postponed or the first online congress in Turkey would be organized in a short time. The OC decided to organize first virtual scientific congress in Turkey in April 2020. Afterwards, a quick announcement was made that the congress would be held virtual and preparations for the online congress were started. It was thought that the number of international speakers could be increased because the congress would be held virtual.

It was planned that speakers would give their speeches online at the time of the presentation via ZOOM (San Jose, CA) program that is a cloud platform for sharing content, video or voice. In order to avoid problems during the presentations, a rehearsal was held with each speaker a few days before the day of congress. After all preparations, the congress was held virtually and participants were asked to participate in a survey at the end of the congress.

It was decided that the courses and live surgeries that were planned would be recorded as videos and uploaded to the ZOOM platform. An online forum was

established for interactive discussions and online stand areas were created for sponsoring companies. The planned duration of the congress was reduced from 4 days to 2 days.

**RESULTS**

After all preparations, congress was started in June 27, 2020. A total of 704 persons were registered to the congress. Two hundred and eight (29.5%) were either speakers or abstract owners/presenters, 433 (61.5%) were participants and 63 (9%) were company representatives. While 4 international speakers were planned to be present in the face-to-face congress, this number was increased to 17 with the virtual congress. When compared with the last 3 congresses, it is seen that the number of participants in the virtual congress was increased considerably. Among the congresses held until the first online congress, the highest number of participants was the 2018 congress in Tbilisi, Georgia with 371 participants.

The home page of congress website was divided into subsections for easy access to scientific contents; “meeting halls”, “oral presentations”, “interactive e-posters”, “video presentations”, “operating room”, “courses”, “e-forum” and “interactive exhibition & activity hall”. In “Meeting Halls” participants could attend live plenary sessions. In this congress, there were 199 oral presentations, 25 interactive e-posters, and 12

video presentations. During the congress, each participant attended the congress for an average of 387 minutes. The most visited section was “courses” apart from plenary sessions (Figure 1). Courses were visited 4792 times in total and most visited course was “Radical Prostatectomy Course – Robotic Radical Prostatectomy - Transperitoneal posterior approach” with 185 views. Another attractive section of our congress was “Operating Room” with 1858 visits. The most watched video of this section was “Neurovascular bundle sparing robotic radical prostatectomy” with 177 views.

After the congress OC asked participants to participate in a survey about virtual congress. A total of 133 persons (18.8%) participated in the survey. The majority of the responders (90.2%) stated that the 2-days congress period was very convenient. Most of the responders stated that registration process was excellent or good (55.73% and 32.82%, respectively). When we asked the participants about the scientific content of the congress, it was identified that the majority of them were quite satisfied with the program offered (Figure 2). In general, participants were fairly satisfied with the quality of images and sound, chat functionality, questions & answers section and technical support and all participants were satisfied with everything presented (Figure 3).

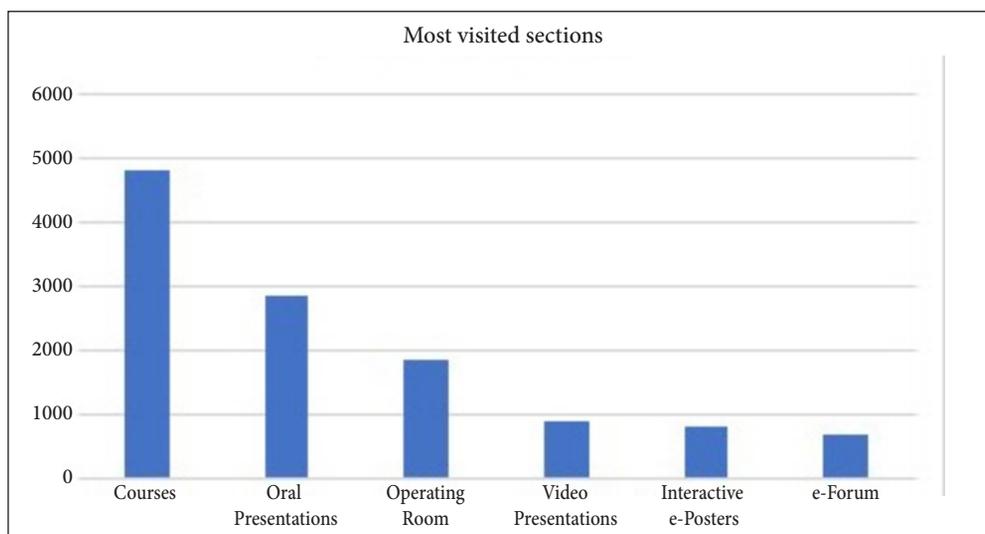


Figure 1. Most visited sections during 10th Online Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress

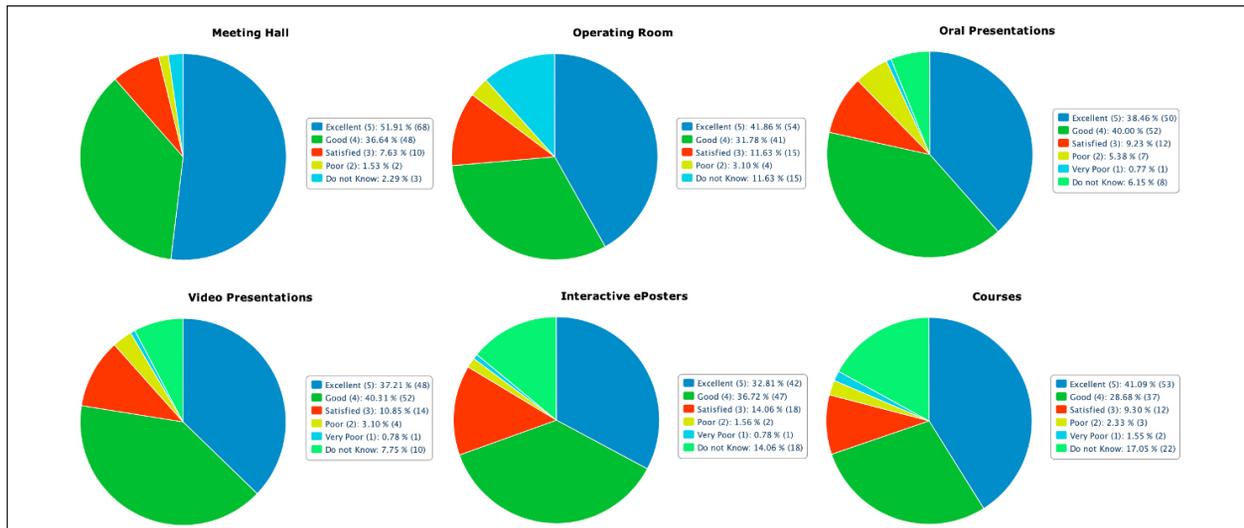


Figure 2. Responses to questions about scientific program: How would you rate the scientific content presented in each section?

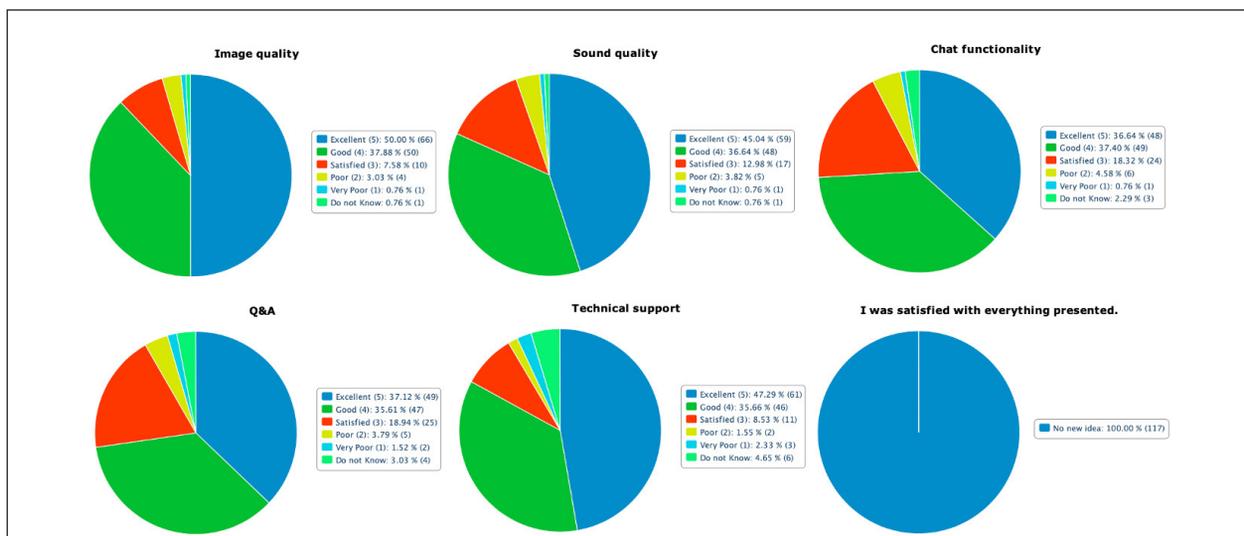


Figure 3. Responses to questions about technical issues: How would you rate the technical issues?

### DISCUSSION

Rapid developments in the field of medical sciences and the obligation of medical doctors to apply the most up-to-date treatments to their patients require physicians to be in a continuous learning process. To achieve this aim, scientific medical congresses and meetings are essential part of this continuous learning process. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic all of the crowd organizations have been cancelled, and many medical congress and meetings could not

be hold in person attendance. In this situation, many of these meetings changed their format to “online” or “virtual” type. In this report, we presented our experiences of the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress which is the first virtual congress in Turkey and maybe also in Europe.

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, virtual congresses have become a “new normal” instead of in person attendance congresses. Though, virtual congresses are not a new entity. First online congress in

medical sciences, INABIS, was organized in 1994 by Mie University School of Medicine in Tsu, Japan (3). Until today, various virtual congresses have been held and these experiences have created an infrastructure for the transition to virtual congress format during pandemic period (4). Apart from being an alternative to face-to-face congresses that cannot be held during the pandemic period, online congresses have also many advantages. Organizing a virtual congress is much cheaper than a traditional in person attendance congress. Virtual congresses eliminate the costs of setting up the congress venue, travel expenses and accommodation. The biggest expense in online congress organization is the cost to be paid for the software for web conferencing. However, this price is much more cheaper than renting the whole congress venue. For our congress, while the estimated cost of in person attending congress was 80387 EUR, this amount decreased to 25569 EUR with the virtual congress. In addition to the cost advantage for the organizers, virtual congresses also provide a great decreased cost advantage for the participants. In order to participate in a traditional congress, the participant or his/her sponsor has to pay travel and accommodation costs that are eliminated with virtual congress. However, in virtual congresses the participants need to pay only for congress registration fee that is significantly cheaper than traditional congress registration fee. In addition, participants do not need to pay any cost for accommodation or travel expenses.

Another important advantage of virtual congress is saving time. In traditional congresses travelling to and from congress venue or participating whole conferences takes a lot of time. In virtual congress there is no time-consuming travels for participants, OC or speakers. Virtual congresses also can save time by eliminating waiting periods in congress venue before or after meeting hours for all attendees. Extra saved time can be spent doing business or having fun with friends or family for the virtual meetings. However, the opportunity to socialize with other colleagues, setting up personal communications and networking during the in person attending meetings was highly missed in virtual events.

Besides saving time and money, virtual congresses offer a chance to participate in the conferences in home comfort. Both participants and speakers can attend the conferences wherever they can access internet. However, it is also important to have a quality internet access in order to keep connected to the virtual event that is organized. There are a lot of scientific congresses or meetings for each specific area that the invited speakers need to participate throughout the year. With the virtual congresses, it is also easier for speakers to participate in multiple congresses even in the same day. In our congress, the number of local speakers was increased from 88 to 94 and international speakers from 4 to 17 when the congress was shifted to an online event.

Lastly it is more likely to organize congresses with broader participation in virtual congresses than traditional ones. In virtual congresses, there is no need to rent a huge congress venue for large number of participants also avoiding expenses for travel and accommodation. Considering all EUA congresses, our virtual congress had the highest number of participants.

Virtual congresses also have some disadvantages. In person attending face to face congresses are important events for socializing, meeting with colleagues and experts in our specialties. We can not communicate and meet with expert faculty members face to face in a virtual congress. Another disadvantage is that the participants require technical training to use the conferencing software. Each participant must have suitable hardware, software, laptops, desktops or smartphones. Internet disconnection or technical problem in laptops or smartphones during conferences can pose a big problem for participants or speakers. Lastly, hands-on courses including endosurgery, laparoscopy or robotic surgery can not take place in virtual meetings.

## CONCLUSION

In this report we shared our first virtual congress experience in the 10th Eurasian Uro-oncology Congress. To our knowledge, this was the first report about virtual urology congress in Turkey and also in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, virtual congresses are becoming the “new normal” and offer cheaper congresses with larger participation in the comfort of home.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare to have no conflicts of interest.

**Financial Disclosure**

The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

**Informed Consent**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Author Contributions**

Conception and design; MG, SA, Data acquisition; AY, AEC, TÇ, Data analysis and interpretation; MÇ, AY, AEC, TÇ, MG, SA, Drafting the manuscript; AY, TÇ, Critical revision of the manuscript for scientific and factual content; AY, TÇ, MG, SA, Statistical analysis; MÇ, Supervision; AY, TÇ, MG, SA.

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