My First CROI

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March 25, 2021 By The Well Project

This post originally appeared on and can be read in its entirety at The Well Project.

I just attended my first CROI (Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections). It was also my first virtual conference and my first conference since the quarantine apocalypse began, lol. When I applied to attend CROI, I was excited for several reasons: 1) because I've heard about CROI many times but have never been to one; I've heard it's the most science-based of the HIV related conferences; 2) I was excited to see the virtual platform and see what that looks like, having recorded sessions, a virtual audience, etc.; and 3) because I haven't attended a conference of ANY kind in over a year, and no offense to anyone, but at this point I probably would've attended a comic book convention, lol.

I remember when I was ten years old I wanted to grow up and go to college and become a scientist. My aunt talked me out of my first choice of becoming a veterinarian and helping animals when she said I'd have to give them shots, lol. So I wanted to be a scientist and test things and have experiments and see why things were, but rarely do we have the perseverance to follow our ten year old dreams. Life happened in its whirlwind fashion as it does, and my journey took lots of other roads since then, yet here I was at the world's premiere scientific conference on viruses like HIV, listening to some of the most brilliant minds in the world in their fields talking about studies they've conducted and exciting things they've found. It was amazing for me. Of course, being the novice that I am, sure I had trouble understanding some of what they said. There was science I didn't know, words and phrases I didn't understand, and more acronyms than I've ever heard in my life, lol, but I was able to make out the bulk of it and I listened carefully and learned along the way. It was kinda like being in a really advanced science class and all the other students were the world's leading scientists, lol, but I never felt intimidated. I felt honored to be among them, listening to them deliberate about the new science, and imagine the implications and possibilities, next steps, and what to look forward to in the future. It was amazing.

This year, of course, CROI had a large Covid-19 footprint and a lot of sessions covered that topic in some capacity. I heard about how past work in the HIV field paved the way to a speedy Covid vaccine and how Covid vaccine research and development is in turn advancing HIV vaccine and

cure research. I heard about promising new drugs in development for SARS CoV2 (Coronavirus) treatment, and the latest research and findings, and I heard a lot of optimism, which was encouraging, but also urgency about variants and the need to end the epidemic before variants can further mutate rendering current vaccines invalid. Though I heard a lot of encouraging news and optimism that we could treat and beat this virus, some believe that Covid-19 may be endemic for a while.

I also learned a lot about advances in HIV and heard some exciting things that the experts seemed enthusiastic about, like advances in reservoir reduction, bNAbs (Broadly Neutralizing HIV-1 Antibodies), improvements in long-acting agents and their possibilities, such as injectables and implants, which are said to be a near future possibility to look out for. This seemed to be the big news that created a lot of buzz among the participants. Could you imagine getting a shot to treat HIV that lasts for a month? What about longer than that? How about an implant that could simultaneously treat HIV and prevent pregnancy? Interesting? I sure thought so. It seems like a really exciting time in HIV research with incredible possibilities to watch out for in the near future.

I was so excited to see that Dr. Anthony Fauci would be presenting a lecture during the opening ceremony, I think he's a brilliant, ethical, and good man and I respect him… and he's the only speaker I already knew, lol. I watched two other speakers that morning and eagerly waited for Dr. Fauci to speak. I watched his introduction by the Director-General of the World Health Organization, and just as Dr. Fauci was about to speak… my internet goes out!!! I'll be honest, I was frantic for a few moments and spoke to my computer in ways that I would perfectly understand if it wanted a divorce, lol. Then I remembered that as part of the virtual platform, all sessions are recorded and accessible at any time… I probably really should apologize to my computer, lol.

I loved the virtual platform. I know I've already mentioned the recorded sessions, but I can't express enough how much I love them. I've wished for years that all conferences would record their workshops to watch sessions that you missed, or rewatch to refresh your memory or take better notes after you get home, etc. This was easily my favorite feature of a virtual platform. There were also so many other features, really great features like chat rooms and lounges, request meetings with colleagues, symposiums, and probably more that I can't even remember, that I just honestly wasn't able to find time to explore because the conference and the platform simply offered so much. CROI did an outstanding job. It was an amazing experience full of incredible knowledge with the most brilliant people. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have attended.

Note from The Well Project: Katie is also a contributor to our team's write-up of sessions from #CROI2021, so please stay tuned for more updates!

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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