
HIMSS 2020: Irresponsible COVID-19 Hazard?



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The annual congress of the Health Information Systems Society (HIMSS) pledged that the show must go on while announcing that President Donald Trump will hold an address.



This will be the first address at HIMSS from an incumbent president and looks like a welcome success for a leadership under some pressure. But, in light of the numerous postponed or cancelled healthcare, sporting and cultural events in the wake of the COVID-19 spread, can HIMSS really justify "the show going on"?

Scheduled to take place in Orlando, Florida, governor of the state, Ron DeSantis, announced on March 1 that two cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed. Florida Surgeon General Dr. Scott Rivkees said that he expects more to follow. Florida is still considered low-risk but there are currently eight individuals in Florida awaiting test results for the virus.

What does this mean for HIMSS 2020?

In 2019, HIMSS attracted over 42,000 attendees with almost 4,000 international visitors. However, we can expect that these numbers will crumble this year since such a large-scale event may put a significant number of healthcare professionals at risk for contracting COVID-19 and also cause genuine risk to the local population.

That is probably why other healthcare congresses have shown caution. On March 3, the European Society of Radiology made the responsible announcement of postponing their similarly-sized European Congress of Radiology in Vienna from March to July. Notably, Vienna has approximately the same amount of confirmed cases as Orange County, FL. Other major healthcare congresses have also looked at the COVID-19 situation and have already postponed or are considering postponing or cancelling their events.

In addition, major companies like Adobe, Facebook, Google, and Apple have also cancelled congress participation around the globe. In an official statement on March 3, CISCO said that they are pulling out of HIMSS 2020 to protect their staff members. Siemens Healthineers has gone a step further and has pulled out of all events in March.

HIMSS has put every precaution in place against COVID-19 for their Orlando congress and has kept delegates informed every step of the way as the spread of the virus has become increasingly alarming.

But the main question we have to ask is this: is HIMSS doing the right thing by carrying on with its meeting while other large public gatherings are being cancelled (even the fate of this year's Tokyo Olympics is hanging in the balance)?

Some people believe that the COVID-19 hype is causing more panic than warranted. Most people recover from COVID-19; in fact the seasonal flu causes more deaths worldwide than coronavirus. China was more aggressively hit because it was unprepared and the virus was unexpected. Even now, the figures for contraction of and death from COVID-19 are worst in China because that is where the outbreak began.

In any case, large gatherings with international travellers pose a risk to containing spread of COVID-19. Is HIMSS making the right decision by going ahead? What do you think?

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