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National

Scientists become superstars as TEDMED moves to Washington

By Brian Vastag, Published: April 14, 2012



(Courtesy of TEDMED / COURTESY OF TEDMED) - Dancer Stephen Petronio performed with an intravenous saline drip stuck into his arm. A blue-smocked assistant struggled to wheel the IV stand around as Petronio vigorously relayed a personal story of censorship in London

Somewhere it is written that the nerds shall inherit the Earth. They got off to a good start last week by taking over the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts for three days of provocation and performance art aimed at spreading new ideas among the well-connected and influential in the worlds of health and medicine.

This was TEDMED, an uber-hip, self-declared “great gathering” that wrapped up Friday, a festival of high-brow nerdiness where ideas are currency, scientists are superstars and a seat in the house costs \$5,000.

A “licensed-but-independent” offshoot of the 28-year-old TED conference, which brings together luminaries from the worlds of technology, entertainment and design, TEDMED moved to Washington from San Diego this year to influence the national conversation regarding our growing pile of medical messes.

After all, it’s hard to imagine the director of the National Institutes of Health, Francis Collins, flying to California to share a stage with Cookie Monster.

The organizers sold 1,500 tickets, with an additional 200 “delegates”—many of them medical students—granted scholarships, making the event almost as exclusive as it was proud of itself.

There’s a rule at TEDMED: No selling from the stage. But it’s loosely enforced. All of the 70 speakers had something to peddle—their ideas—even if the sales pitch took the form of plush microbe toys tossed like super-sized anthrax spores into the audience.

Call it the Lollapalooza of medical meetings. But here, ultrasound machines for checking for blockage in one’s neck arteries replaced the bungee jump, and choir-enhanced five-course dinners in the gilded Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress stood in for soggy slices of pizza gobbled under a tarp.

The serious, sublime and ridiculous all joyously jostled for brain space while venture capitalists and biotechnology executives and pharma lobbyists availed themselves of meditation chambers and yoga classes.

Eminent Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson doffed his tie upon taking the podium, proclaiming he was overdressed amidst all the “Silicon Valley informal.”

One of his ideas—more of a kernel of an idea, in that it could be fully expressed via Twitter—quickly went semi-viral. “The ideal scientist is one who thinks like a poet and works like a bookkeeper,” Wilson said, and a thousand retweets sent the thought aloft, though the meeting’s shoddy WiFi kept this charming notion from gaining over-the-top online momentum.

Collins declared a grave crisis in the development of new drugs, intoning that it now takes 14 years and a billion dollars to bring a new pharmaceutical to market.

Later, dancer Stephen Petronio gyrated with an intravenous saline drip stuck into his arm. A blue-smocked assistant struggled to wheel the IV stand around as Petronio vigorously relayed a personal story of censorship in London that involved a \$1,400 T-shirt adorned with images of cowboys having gay sex. The relationship of the story to modern medicine was unclear except in that the performance could be categorized as modern dance with large-bore needles.

One idea took the form of a four-foot-tall white robot with a video screen for a head that disconcertingly displayed the face of a human who was driving the robot from a couch not 10 feet away. This robot, the VGo, could be piloted from across the country, and it makes for a good “second presence” for physicians desiring to check in on remote patients, said VGo chief operating officer Thomas Ryden. The company has sold to health-care providers a “couple hundred” of the \$6,000 machines, whose worth is illustrated, Ryden said, by the story of a little

girl who requested a second surgery so that she could be paid another house call by the wheeled wonder.

“Soil!” was yet another unexpected idea, brought to life by organic farming icon Joel Salatin.

He pantomimed some of the fabulous microscopic creatures living unnoticed beneath our feet. Wearing a smart blue suit, Salatin drooped his arms and lurched around.

“If you take an electron microscope and you look through that finder into the soil you’ll see a four-legged bla-Bu-bla-Bu-bla-Bu kind of thing kind of walking along,” he said, arms swinging low as he became this creature. “Like a cow, he’s got mandibles and he’s salivating and he’s grazing. . . . All of a sudden!” Salatin shouted, “galloping in . . . is a six-legged narwhal-looking thing with a spear on the end of his nose, he come in, impales the side of the bla-Bu-bla-Bu-bla-Bu kind of thing, sucks out all the juices, desiccates the bla-Bu-bla-Bu thing right there in front of your eyes, and before that thing can even fall comes charging in a 10-legged centipede-looking thing with scissors on his head, I mean imagine this, it’s not even a costume party, he comes running in with scissors and, whack, he knocks the head off the bla-Bu-bla-Bu thing and you know, eats it.”

Soil creature interpretation complete, Salatin got to the point. “The thing is, this is happening with trillions and trillions of critters and beings . . . all of this invisible life that you and I are utterly unaware of.”

Also, he said: Worms refuse to eat Velveeta.

Another time, an inscrutable idea took the form of Katie Couric and Billie Jean King conversing about the role of women in American sports and Katie Couric’s colon.

Another idea was implicit: Corporate sponsorship, although necessary to pay for the open-bar bash at the National Building Museum, should be discreet, tasteful and largely relegated to a tent outside the Kennedy Center dubbed the “social hub.”

The most prominent idea being hawked seemed to be that of the wonder and specialness of TEDMED itself; the speakers roamed a stage devoid of adornment other than thigh-high block letters spelling out TEDMED, and to spread this brand the organizers beamed the talks and performances to 350 hospitals, clinics and universities across the country where, it was claimed, 50,000 remote delegates watched, presumably in wonder, mulling the messages deeply before instantly reminiscing about that one time when Cookie Monster was admonished by ultramarathoner Scott Jurek that cookies “are a sometimes food.”

TEDMED will be back in Washington next April, now a permanent presence on the capital’s medical-philosophical-entertainment landscape. Here’s hoping the surgeon general and Oscar the Grouch are available.