UPDATE: HIV and COVID-19 Conference CROI to Make Materials Public [VIDEO]

On April 15, full and free access to all virtual session recordings from the HIV and COVID-19 conference will be provided online.

March 25, 2021 By Trent Straube

Update: On March 24, organizers behind the annual Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunities Infections (CROI) announced that conference materials would be available online starting April 15. The CROI statement reads in part: “In response to community requests, and in a desire to make the full scientific information and discourse from Virtual CROI 2021 available as quickly and broadly as possible, full and free access to all virtual CROI 2021 session recordings will be provided via the CROI website on April 15, 2021. The conference abstracts and the opening Martin Delaney Presentation have been available since the conference week and remain available at croiconference.org.”

The annual Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunities Infections (CROI) is a big deal for the HIV, hepatitis and COVID-19 communities. It’s when researchers in those fields present their latest data and discoveries, findings that can be game-changing and headline-making.

Unlike previous events, organizers of CROI 2021, held virtually March 6 to 10, elected to keep most webcasts of the presentations and conferences behind a paywall, accessible only to registered attendees for up to six months after the event. After pushback for that decision, CROI made a 332-page ebook of abstracts available to the public March 11.

> The vCROI 2021 Abstract Book is now available on the Conference Platform and on the CROI Website (https://t.co/sdamDasZAx).
>
> — IAS–USA (@IAS_USA) March 11, 2021

Abstracts refer to short summaries, provided by the scientists, of their research. Abstracts

generally include background on the research topic, a description of the method of research, the results of the research and the scientists' conclusions. For this year's CROI, researchers submitted 1,153 abstracts; 698 were accepted, and 161 of them focused on SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19.

A video of the opening session, about access to COVID-19 vaccines, is also available for viewing on YouTube and the CROI site as well as directly below.

"CROI will provide full, free access to all of the live and recorded sessions from virtual CROI 2021 at some time in the future," the event's media manager Mark Aurigemma told POZ, adding that the conference foundation board will be discussing options for providing more materials to the public "as soon as is feasible." The conference session webcasts remain available for those who registered for the meeting, Aurigemma pointed out, including several hundred scholarship recipients and more than 100 journalists, most from HIV community media.

In the days leading up to the ebook release, over 150 advocates and groups across the globe, ranging from the Black AIDS Institute to Treatment Access Group and Red Ribbon Istanbul, signed an open letter to CROI organizers regarding the lack of public access. Addressed to the CROI Foundation and the International Antiviral Society–USA, which partner for the annual conference, the letter reads:

> "The undersigned individuals and organizations are writing to strongly object to the plan to restrict public access to CROI materials for at least six months after the conference. The CROI website currently states:
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> 'Unique this year, only registered attendees will have access to the meeting content during and up to 6 months after the conference. Recordings of live and on-demand sessions will be available to nonregistrants approximately 1-month after the conference only through a paid subscription'
>
> "We recognize that there are significant challenges in running virtual conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic, but preventing access to research results—the bulk of which are from publicly funded research—cannot be the solution.
>
> "Historically, CROI has been a trailblazer and set the standard for providing webcast access to all presentations to those unable to attend the conference in person, typically making webcasts publicly accessible at the end of each day.
>
> "CROI community scholarships are also a longstanding, important and laudable feature of the meeting, but it is notable that applicants are required to have plans to share information with

> their communities, and this year they will not be able to refer people to the source material because it will be limited to conference registrants and/or behind a paywall for at least six months.
>
> "Similarly, anyone seeking to offer written coverage of the conference and cite presentations will be unable to provide working links. Affected communities will be the hardest hit due to the costs imposed on accessing materials.
>
> "We call on CROI and the CROI Foundation to seek other sources of funding to cover any fiscal shortfalls associated with the virtual format and to make all conference materials accessible to the public on March 11th, after the meeting ends (or as soon as possible thereafter)."

In addition to the ebook of abstracts, CROI's opening presentation by Greg Gonsalves, PhD, an infectious disease specialist at Yale University, and Fatima Hassan, a human rights lawyer in Cape Town, is available for viewing, including in this article, above. It's titled "Vaccine Nationalism is Killing Us: How Inequities in Research and Access to SARS-CoV-2 Vaccines Will Perpetuate the Pandemic." You can read more about it in the POZ article "Advocates Call for Global Access to COVID-19 Vaccines."

Have criticized the current #CROI2021 policy on public access to presentations, but salute them for featuring this talk by @_HassanF and @gregggonsalves and making it available, as well as promoting the call for global #COVID19 vaccine equity https://t.co/SrHW2yTvwi https://t.co/9n6h9MGtwy

— TAGHIVscience (@TAGHIVscience) March 11, 2021

CROI launched in 1993 and generally attracts more than 4,000 participants, each paying several hundred dollars. Late registration remains open until March 30, which grants access to all the virtual materials, but it costs $650, a price many—especially those in more vulnerable communities—cannot afford.

Last year, CROI happened to be scheduled right as the nation began shutting down due to

COVID-19. The conference pivoted and was held virtually. This year was the same. The conference remains vital to public health because it includes research on SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19.

As POZ science editor Liz Highleyman wrote in her lead-up to this year's conference, "Last year's CROI included a hastily planned session on the new coronavirus. A year later, more than half the invited talks and a quarter of accepted abstracts are related to COVID-19, and many HIV researchers and advocates have pivoted to focus on the new pandemic."

To read our complete coverage for the research coming out of this year's conference, see #CROI 2021.

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http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/article/pushback-hiv-covid19-conference-croi-makes-materials-public