

NEWS

# Heading to INSAR 2022: Hybrid format, COVID-19, Texas beef

BY PETER HESS

11 MAY 2022

Autism researchers from around the world have descended on Austin, Texas, this week for the first in-person **annual meeting of the International Society for Autism Research** (INSAR) since 2019. Along with virtual attendees dialing in from home, the four-day meeting, which starts today, has assembled more than 1,700 scientists, clinicians, advocates and other stakeholders from 30-plus countries.

For early-career researchers, the meeting represents a welcome — and in some cases, first — **chance to meet face to face** with other autism researchers. Established scientists, too, say they are eager to see colleagues in person after three years.

Even the best-run online conferences don't offer the opportunity to run into people in the hallway, says **Kristen Lyall**, associate professor at the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "There have been a lot of great advances with remote conferences, but it inevitably feels more draining to try to attend online. Not having that same level of Zoom fatigue, and really getting to participate in the meeting again, is something I look forward to."

The draw of such serendipity wasn't enough for some scientists, who strongly disagree with Texas state laws restricting abortion and criminalizing gender-affirming health care for transgender people.

"I am totally boycotting this Texas 'land of guns, beef and where you don't own your own uterus' conference," says **Brian Lee**, associate professor of epidemiology at Drexel University. "My team isn't submitting to INSAR at all, but we are submitting to other conferences, like the European Psychiatric Association."

Other researchers gave up on the chance for chance encounters out of concern over COVID-19 case numbers, which have been rising in some places, including Austin.

“I did register to attend in person because I’m in Austin, but honestly no longer feel comfortable, as my youngest child is still not eligible to be vaccinated,” says **Micheal Sandbank**, assistant professor of special education at the University of Texas at Austin. “I’ll probably be weirdly lurking outside the hotel to meet up with colleagues outside, but I doubt I’ll feel comfortable putting myself in an unventilated space with lots of folks to hear any talks.”

Conference attendees who registered for the in-person meeting but wish to attend virtually instead can do so without making any changes, because in-person registration includes access to all virtual sessions and content, says INSAR president **Connie Kasari**, professor of human development and psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“You can actually go in person and watch the whole thing virtually,” she says, but presenters who have changed plans to attend virtually instead of in person should let conference organizers know.

Building on its most recent in-person meetings, INSAR has added autism-friendly accommodations to welcome **autistic attendees**: A dedicated autistic researcher meet-up area and a sensory break room, free from discussions and cell phones, will be open all day for the entirety of the conference.

Yesterday, INSAR’s **Autistic Researchers Committee** briefed staff at the hotel convention center on dietary needs and how to help anyone with autism who is having difficulties, says committee co-chair **Dena Gassner**, a graduate student at Adelphi University in New York. “They’ll have my phone number in case anyone’s struggling at any particular point.”

Color-coded lanyards are available to help autistic attendees indicate whether and how they would like to be approached socially, along with ear plugs for those with sensory sensitivities.

“A lot of our folks are going to be very overwhelmed, as this is maybe their first time traveling to a venue for a long time,” Gassner says. “We’re hoping these various things will make things a little easier for our autistic participants who are coming, as well as other people with neurodiverse differences.”

Gassner is excited to network but is also nervous about COVID-19 exposure, as she could not find a second booster of the vaccine before the conference. Because many autistic researchers are attending virtually, their special-interest group has postponed its meeting until 2023, she says.

Even so, the networking opportunities for autistic researchers are valuable, says **Oluwatobi Abubakare**, a graduate student at Indiana University Bloomington. “I haven’t had many opportunities to meet other autistic researchers like me, and INSAR seems to be the place where a lot of us gather, so I’m excited to share in that space.”

Thanks to the meeting’s hybrid format, remote participants are able to weigh in on panel Q&A sections remotely, says **Zack Williams**, a medical and doctoral student at Vanderbilt University in

Nashville, Tennessee, and secretary of the Autistic Researchers Committee.

As a remote presenter, **Gül Dölen**, associate professor of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, says she was asked to submit a pre-recorded video of her talk but found that requirement too burdensome in addition to her other responsibilities running a lab, so she withdrew.

“I don’t know how it’s going to work, but I’m hopeful,” Williams says. “I like the idea of keeping conferences hybrid.”

Check back throughout the week for *Spectrum*’s ongoing coverage of **INSAR 2022**.

**Cite this article:** <https://doi.org/10.53053/WQIO2285>