Message from the President

The Webinar Network: a Teaching Model for Latin America.

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Continuing medical education of ophthalmologists is a fundamental requirement for quality eye care in the populations they serve. Latin America faces several challenges for continuing education of ophthalmologists. With a total area of 8 million square miles and varied economies, geographical, time and economic difficulties to access courses and congresses contribute to make continuing education a difficult and expensive process for ophthalmologists. While Spanish and Portuguese are the prevailing languages in the region, there is a scarcity of educational resources in these languages as compared to those in English, making self-education even more difficult to those not proficient in English as a second language.

Evidence suggests that e-learning is as effective as traditional face-to-face1,2 training. E-learning online activities can be asynchronous (learners and teachers are not online at the same time – e.g. online courses) or synchronous. As compared with asynchronous activities, giving presentations through synchronous webinars (a contraction of web-based seminars) offer the advantage of lower costs and less time needed for content preparation. Webinars also promote a social environment; a greater feeling of human presence and less isolation, as students and teachers are able to interact.

Several studies have suggested the benefits of e-learning. In one of the most extensive and thorough published reviews, carried out by the United States Department of Education in 2009 and reviewed in 20101, a critical analysis of 176 studies comparing online or mixed (blended) learning with in-person education showed that online students had a slightly better performance than those who studied the same material through traditional in-person or exclusive online education. When used in their pure forms, online learning seemed to be as effective as traditional in-person education. According to the authors, the effect was greater when online education had been collaborative or directed by a tutor than when students worked independently. In a systematic review evaluating the effect of Internet-based education for health sciences, Cook et al2 conclude that Internet-based education is as effective as education by traditional methods.

An additional advantage that was not assessed in these studies is the opportunity of remote education that e-learning offers. This is particularly key in professions requiring a continuous update of knowledge (such as the health sciences), but where traditional education methods may result expensive, impractical and difficult to access for professionals living in remote areas. Even for those living in big cities, attending to congresses and lectures implies that they leave their practices and losing profit to get education. Synchronous e-learning interventions, such as teleconferences, webinars and chats, allow for a format almost similar to traditional education: teachers present lively while students listen, take notes, ask questions, etc. People do not need to be at the same physical space, with the resulting benefit in practicality and less costs of classroom, accommodation, traveling, meals. The only physical requirement is a computer (or mobile phone) with an updated operating system, high-speed Internet connection, and software for transmission of the lecture.

The Pan-American Association of Ophthalmology (PAAO) has established as its mission: ‘to prevent blindness through lifelong education and cultural exchange among ophthalmologists in the Western hemisphere’. Under the presidencies of Drs. Mark Mannis and Ana Luisa Hölfling-Lima, the PAAO is working, jointly with the International Council of Ophthalmology, on developing the Webinars Network Project http://ophthalmologywebinars.blogspot.com.ar/?ref=paao-ico. The goal of the Webinar Network is to facilitate and make continuing medical education for ophthalmologists in Latin America more efficient, as well as to increase the scientific, educational and cultural exchange among teachers and students in the Americas.

The project plans to: 1) establish a network of academic programs that share training activities for residents and ophthalmologists, 2) create a clearing house of synchronous learning activities in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, 3) help content experts meet the quality guidelines of medical education accreditation organizations, 4) assist academic programs with the logistics to develop webinars, and 5) help academic programs develop abilities to create effective, significant and interesting online teaching interventions.

As a part of this project, the PAAO started organizing monthly conferences by top subject matter experts. The presentations alternate short segments of lecturing with questions to the audience and immediate feedback. There is also time allotted for questions and comments at the end, a valued moment of dialogue for attendants and lecturers. Consideration of adult learning principles (relevance, interactivity, immediate feedback, appropriately defined objectives) and an adequate use of images, videos and text in the presentations are key factors that have proven to improve learning from lectures and conferences. Lectures are recorded and uploaded to the Internet for those unable to attend or willing to review the conference.

http://www.campuspaao.org/

While there are no data about the exact number of ophthalmologists in Latin America, it is estimated that today there is an average of 51 ophthalmologists per million population. This would imply about 29 thousand ophthalmologists serving a population of 570 million people. We expect the benefit of being able to attend these conferences from the comfort of their own home, without traveling or accommodation expenses, and no lost income, will be attractive for ophthalmologists in the region, in particular those who live in more isolated places or with lower resources for continuing education. Language, time, and cost barriers could be overcome to enhance ophthalmic education of residents and ophthalmologists in the region.

REFERENCES:

3. www.paaoo.org