INFORMATION SKILLS IN THE CURRICULUM

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Educational changes

Medical education in South Africa is on the threshold of extensive and radical changes. The call for change in the training of physicians received international acclaim with some world- and regional congresses initiated by the World Health Organisation. Certain paradigm shifts have already taken place and these changes will undoubtedly have an influence on medical education and practice. Some of the changes are:

Community orientated learning. There must be a shift from lecture hall education and training hospitals to community orientated learning. The aims, objectives and basic principles of an institution must be defined by the needs of the community.

Professional thinking. Students must be trained in professional thinking that can be applied over a wide spectrum rather than concentrate on the superficial learning of a large amount of detail which is soon forgotten.

Problem-solving and lifelong learning skills. The student must be able to apply from the start that which he has learned, in the context of handling of patients and health care problems.

Usage of information sources. It is much better to learn how to use information resources and to find information yourself than to receive knowledge from somebody else and try to memorize it. Medical students must be exposed early in their training to the vast profusion of electronic resources. They have to acquire sophisticated skills and manage their own lifelong learning, to be able to respond to the rapidly expanding knowledge base of the biomedical sciences.

Problem-based learning

The Medical Faculty of the University of the Free State has investigated the possibility of changing from a traditional curriculum to a community orientated, problem- based learning curriculum.

NURSING STUDENTS

From 1997 the Department of Nursing is implementing problem-based learning for all the first year students.

Phase 1: During October 1996 the facilitators for each group, as well as the lecturers and the information officer for the Department of Nursing will meet to plan and design the curriculum that will be used for the first year nursing students. With first hand involvement, the information officer will have a clear vision of the goals of the department. This will also help to ensure that applicable resources would be available for students to use. Because the information officer is also responsible for the information needs of other departments, information retrieval skills will be taught to the facilitator of each group in order for them to assist the information officer in training the students.

Phase 2: Beginning in January 1997, the first year nursing students will be involved in an orientation week at the university. During this time, they will be given a general introduction to the library. The 100 students will then be divided into 10 groups and be placed in the community where they will compile community profiles. Twice a week, these groups will return to the university where they will follow a problem-based learning curriculum.

Because problem-based learning is a new concept for the library and also because the library was not built with the problem-based learning concept in mind, separate discussion rooms for each group are not available in the library. The students will therefore have their introductory sessions at the Nursing Department lecture rooms. They will divide into small groups to discuss the case they have to study. They will identify facts about the case as well as learning issues or areas for further investigation. They will then visit the library to retrieve information about the case.

Phase 3: The third phase is a period of self-directed learning during which the students, independent of the facilitator or lecturer, consult resources in the library. The extent and depth of the issues that has to be pursued will determine the time that will be spent on information gathering.

Phase 4: On completion of phase three, the students will convene in their respective groups in the library to discuss what they have learned and refine their knowledge and understanding of the problem and its management. Information material for each specific case will be put into a special reserve collection. A time limit will be set to enable every student to use the material. As the students get more proficient in finding their own information material, these collections will be reduced to include only the core material necessary. Facilitators will be given bibliographies so that they can ensure that the basic resources are identified by the students. Advanced techniques for retrieving references from databases such as Medline will be given on request. The last step will be for the students to assess themselves individually with regard to problem-solving skills, knowledge acquisition, self-directed learning and support of the group. Their peers as well as the facilitators and lecturers will also comment on each self-assessment.