

Editorial

Can Distance Learning Improve the Quality of Medical Education?

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A search of the literature has revealed that the effectiveness of distance learning for medical students, residents, and physicians is not well tested or understood even though the revolution in technology and the advancement of the internet have made distance learning feasible and widely available.

In 1995, Houston and Beck¹ distributed an educational package related to eye diseases to 270 general practitioners and evaluated the improvement in their knowledge of 6 common eye diseases that general practitioners most often see in their practices. The authors found that the distance learning effort led to improvement in theoretical patient management.

Stout et al² performed a study that included 36 physicians, nurses, and medical assistants from 14 primary care pediatric practices. The authors tested the effectiveness of a multifaceted distance learning approach in improving spirometry training and knowledge. They used the Spirometry Fundamentals CD-ROM, case-based interactive webinars led by clinical experts, and internet-based spirometry training. The authors concluded that their program led to an increase in the quality of spirometry testing and improved assessment of asthma severity levels.

Distance learning modules can also be conducted as a part of larger quality improvement programs. A recent study carried out in Dutch hospitals described the use of an e-learning course to educate nurses about delirium and its care within a larger quality improvement initiative. The authors concluded that in many healthcare organizations e-learning is an effective way to educate large groups of professionals.³

Distance learning has many advantages. McGrath⁴ stated that distance learning allows the

learner to be in charge of the environment and time of learning. Distance learning programs may be more convenient for many health professionals because learners can fit the learning activity within their busy schedules. Static media that remain available to the learner also facilitate review of the educational material as desired.

However, distance learning tools and strategies have some limitations. They can be expensive or difficult to implement and may create a feeling of isolation and insecurity in learners who are accustomed to live, in-person education activities.

More research is needed to assess the efficacy of distance learning in improving the quality of medical education and to identify the circumstances and strategies that are most effective for specific individuals and learning organizations. Distance learning can be a powerful tool for improving the quality of medical education, which is an important factor in enhancing the quality of healthcare delivery.

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