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Postgraduate educational programs and the role of specialist's societies

Educating adults has specificities, which have been identified over the years, and the term “andragogy” was coined to design any form of adult learning (opposite: paedagogy = child learning). Analysis of the effectiveness of different types of interventions in improving health professional performance and health outcome showed that “dissemination-only strategies, such as conferences, demonstrated little or no changes in health professional behaviour or health outcome when used alone” [2]. It is generally accepted that retention of information is very low ($\approx 20\%$) when one just sits and listens in comparison with 80–90% when one is actively involved and has to find one's own solution to problems.

Because of this, the structure of postgraduate courses has very much changed over the last 10–15 years.

Medical education has gained in importance, with thousands of web sites and even several journals devoted to it. Moreover, leading general medical journals have demonstrated an increasing interest in this topic [3]. The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) has recently published an important document on “Global Standards for Quality Improvement in Postgraduate Medical Education”. Like other reports, this report demonstrates the complexity of educational procedures and highlights the need in educational expertise. To complicate matters, graduate medical students present changing characteristics with time [1].

Since 2002, the Spine Society of Europe (SSE) has organised a programme of instructional courses aimed at covering the entire catalogue of spinal pathologies. It was decided from the start that the quality of the courses would be evaluated. The programme was scheduled over 4 years: the 2002 course was devoted to low back pain, deformities were addressed in 2003, cervical spine disorders are the topic for 2004 and the last course will cover infections, tumours and trauma. The course chairmen selected faculty members based on their personal criteria. It clearly appears that being an expert in spinal disorders is not synonymous with being a good teacher in that field. Several suggestions on

how to improve the quality of these SSE courses have arisen from the evaluation procedures.

An examination of the topic of postgraduate and continuous education, and specifically of the role of societies such as the SSE, showed the need for further critical analysis of both the content/structure of postgraduate courses and the selection/training of the teaching faculty. In order to achieve the best possible attendance, a professional, academic or political authority should endorse courses. To achieve the best possible efficacy, the course structure should comply with the principles of andragogy. Teaching adults has specific requirements, which need to be learnt by the faculty members. The SSE has therefore decided to organise an educational programme for its teaching faculty.

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