

Lifelong Learning

Albert Einstein said: “Never regard study as a duty, but as the enviable opportunity to learn... for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later work belongs.” By viewing learning as an opportunity, clinicians may find a variety of avenues for gaining knowledge—in the classroom, on the job, and in daily life.

Fast Facts

- ▲ *The definition of what constitutes high-quality, effective continuing education (CE) may be different for each clinician. However, the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME, www.accme.org), has pretty clear guidelines. Page 34.*
- ▲ *The wide variety of online content now available makes it easier than ever to acquire both updated clinical knowledge and required CE hours from the comfort of home or office—or any place with Internet access. Page 36.*
- ▲ *Clinicians in all areas of medicine should consider creating and maintaining professional portfolios, which include essential documentation such as CV, licenses, certificates, CE credits, committee involvement, and memberships. Page 39.*

Both NPs and PAs are required to participate in CE courses in order to maintain licensure. But beyond the required aspect of CE, there are many excellent reasons to keep up on the latest theories, clinical updates, techniques, and technology in the rapidly evolving profession of medicine. Networking with colleagues and hearing the latest on one’s profession are also excellent reasons to attend annual professional association meetings.

Lifelong learning is a given for clinicians in all specialties, says Michigan-based John McGinnity, MS, PA-C, who has worked as a cardiology PA for thirteen years. He appreciates educational conferences where he can learn about cutting-edge research that is applicable to the patients he cares for on a daily basis—information he can take back to the office that will improve patient outcomes. “I want to see multiple studies telling me the same thing before I jump on the bandwagon,” he says.

But for PAs the licensing structure ensures that they stay informed in areas of general practice as well as one’s specialty. “PAs retake their boards every six years,” explains Mr. McGinnity. This means that even though he specializes in one area, he needs to stay up-to-date generally. “We tend to be lifelong learners because every six years, we have to study things we haven’t looked at in a long time. It’s not unusual to see an OB PA at a cardiology lecture,” he adds.

Mr. McGinnity is active in his professional organizations at both the state and national levels and helps organize CE conferences for his peers. He says one topic that should probably be discussed further is the relationship between healthcare professionals and pharmaceutical and medical device companies. “Industry supports a tremendous amount of education and research,” he notes. “What role should they play? We need to have synergy and an ethical relationship.”

What Makes “Good” CE?

When evaluating a course in terms of quality, a good place to start is to compare it with the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME, www.accme.org) guidelines for physician CME. From the ACCME’s standpoint, quality CME should do the following:

- **Contribute to patient safety and practice improvement.** A “good” CME activity should have a direct impact on improving the quality of direct patient care.

- **Be based on valid content.** The ACCME’s Website states that “CME must not promote recommendations, treatment, or manners of practicing medicine that are known to have risks or dangers that outweigh the benefits, or are known to be ineffective in the treatment of patients.”

- **Be independent of commercial interest.** The ACCME has strict guidelines (and they’re getting stricter all the time) about industry support and CME. The bottom line is that CME activities must not in any way be influenced by a pharmaceutical company, medical device manufacturer, or other commercial interests.

MaryMoonAllison, RN, BSN, MHSE, is director of the accreditation program for the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC, www.nursecredentialing.org). “Much like the ACCME,” says Ms. Allison, “our organization has built-in criteria that we use to accredit organizations providing CE.” In designing CE activities, the ANCC requires that organizations consider key elements such as these:

- ✓ Needs of the learner (i.e., the “needs assessment,” which Ms. Allison says is becoming more and more important)
- ✓ Qualifications of the faculty and of the group sponsoring the conference
- ✓ Program design
- ✓ Contact hours being awarded
- ✓ Evaluation process
- ✓ Full disclosure of industry, commercial, or product associations
- ✓ Assurance that faculty with ties to industry will present unbiased information

In evaluating a continuing education program, Ms. Allison suggests that NPs and PAs study meeting brochures carefully to review the learning objectives and compare them with their own goals. “Certainly, the number of hours to be awarded should be listed there, and the fees,” she says. In addition, clinicians should know who has accredited the learning hours.

Also, says Ms. Allison, “faculty members should be listed along with any disclosures or conflicts.” A disclosure is not a reason to avoid the meeting, but it’s something the attendee should know going in, says Ms. Allison. “I wouldn’t advise someone not to go if there is a disclosure, but just be aware. Sometimes these folks are the experts in the field.” If the program you attend is accredited by the ACCME or the ANCC, potential conflicts have been evaluated and resolved to the satisfaction of the accrediting organization.

Ms. Allison says that CE is becoming more focused on outcomes and what clinicians will actually do with what they learn.

This is one reason that a needs assessment is such an important component in determining what types of courses are awarded accreditation. “If you really don’t need to know it and you won’t use it, you have to ask yourself, ‘What personal professional need am I meeting in attending this education activity?’” Ms. Allison points out. She adds, however, that a course that doesn’t seem to have direct application may actually yield very important information. She advises clinicians to “scan the environment” from time to time to see what’s new out there.

CE at Your Fingertips

For the technically inclined—and today that’s an increasing number of NPs and PAs—online CE provides the option to learn from anywhere, with no travel hassles or expenses and no time away from work. The wide variety of online content now available makes it easier than ever to acquire both updated clinical knowledge and required CE hours from the comfort of home or office—or any place with Internet access.

Ann Johnson, RN, is co-founder and chief operations officer at Wild Iris Medical Education, Inc. (www.wildirismedical.com), a

provider of online CE for nurses at all levels as well as for occupational therapists and emergency medical professionals. The company is nationally accredited by the ANCC and has been in business for eight years. CE—online or otherwise—should follow adult learning principles and be developed by authors knowledgeable in the field, says Ms. Johnson. “The ANCC asks for content to be reviewed on a regular basis and that it be vetted through someone with at least a masters in nursing and by someone considered to be a member of the target audience,” says Ms. Johnson.

“We provide the content and post-test for free. After you pass the test, you pay and print off your certificate,” Ms. Johnson explains. What this means for NPs seeking CE hours online is that they can “try before they buy,” which ensures that they are getting the level of learning they need, she says.

A significant advantage of online education, according to Ms. Johnson, is that it can be updated on a moment’s notice. “The way things are going in medicine today, we have to be cutting edge,” she says. “If I write an article on avian flu today and it’s published in two months, it may already be outdated. We can update every day. I feel I have to provide NPs with the kind of

Extra Credit: Other Benefits of CE

Aside from the required aspect of CE and the potential for a little R&R, there are many excellent reasons to keep up on the latest theories, clinical updates, techniques, and technology in the rapidly evolving profession of medicine. While most clinicians have their own list of reasons, here are a few:

■ **Intellectual stimulation:** There is something about being in or creating a learning environment (whether it’s a lecture hall, the airport Marriott, or your own den) that helps recharge the batteries. Today, thanks to advances in technology, that learning environment may be sitting in front of the computer screen or having a box lunch in an auditorium while listening to a lecture that’s being transmitted from the other side of the country. Wherever or however it happens, staying stimulated at an intellectual level can not only keep practitioners sharp clinically, but also helps them stay engaged with learning in general.

■ **Collegiality and networking:** Particularly for clinicians who work in a small practice or are based in a rural area, the opportunity to

exchange ideas with colleagues from other parts of the country is something to look forward to. It’s easy to get isolated or stuck in certain practice patterns, even when there may be new and better ways to treat patients or manage a practice. Reading about updates in books and journals is one thing. Having lively discussions over coffee or drinks about those same topics can add an entirely new level of interest. Networking with peers is also an excellent way to maintain perspective, share common challenges, and make connections for future career opportunities.

■ **Change of pace and scenery:** At a medical conference, with meetings, lectures, and hands-on learning, clinicians are engaged all day long; but it’s a different pace from back at the office. Maybe not slower, but different—and that can be a welcome relief from the usual routine. A change of scenery is also nice. There is value in breathing in a different geography; seeing and experiencing new things; and escaping, say, four feet of snow in the winter if you live in New Hampshire or 110-degree heat in the summer if you live in Phoenix.

education I myself look for, which is what's accurate today."

The downside of online learning is that you miss out on the collegial experience. "If someone at a conference says something you don't understand, you can get clarification right there. We have feedback forms for when people have questions, but it's not the same kind of interaction," admits Ms. Johnson. The ease and cost effectiveness of online learning, however, may offset the drawbacks, at least for a portion of the required hours.

Ms. Johnson sees a future rich in online learning. She says to expect more interactive courses as graphics continue to improve and high-speed Internet access becomes available everywhere. The changing demographics of practicing nurses will also contribute to the expansion of online education. "When we first started the business, the average nurse was 47 with no technical knowledge. [For] the newer generation... taking a test online is nothing to them," says Ms. Johnson.

Learning Opportunities Abound

There is, of course, more to learning than CE alone. Lifelong learning can take the form of an intellectually stimulating hobby, in-depth reading on a subject of interest, curiosity about other cultures, mastering a new language, continuing your formal education, or closely following current affairs. Such learning can enhance your practice as well as your life.

NP Jo Ann Woodward recently enrolled in the Masters of Healthcare Innovation (MHI) program at Arizona State University. "I have ideas, and the MHI seems right up my alley to help me direct myself to make those ideas come through," says Ms. Woodward. This relatively new program offered through ASU's nursing department is a hybrid, combining online learning with classroom time. "At 58, I'd never experienced online learning," she says, adding that she found it to be a very supportive learning environment with teachers available by cellphone and small class sizes.

Noel Genova, MA, PA-C, also returned to school mid-career. She has worked part-time for most of her 25-year career as a PA, in part to allow enough time for the process of lifelong learning. "I wanted to develop other sides of my career, not just the clinical side." To that end, Ms. Genova worked to obtain her masters in public policy at the University of Southern Maine from 1991

to 1996. Ms. Genova has also been extremely active in her professional organizations, has developed a curriculum in evidence-based medicine, has served on a committee of Maine's Board of Licensure in Medicine, and has taught at the PA training program in her area.

Deborah Post, MSN, ARNP, has enjoyed what might be called on-the-job lifelong learning. Throughout her career, Ms. Post, now

The Professional Portfolio

MaryMoon Allison, RN, BSN, MHSA, of the American Nurses Credentialing Center, says that clinicians in all areas of medicine should consider creating and maintaining professional portfolios. Although clinicians often display their diplomas and other professional credentials, the professional portfolio goes into greater depth, including CV, licenses, certificates, CE credits, committee involvement, and memberships. Ms. Allison adds another important element to the list: your professional goals. "Goals are like New Year's resolutions," she says. "If you write them down, you're more likely to do them." By having your professional development goals in writing, you can easily review them year to year to ensure that the learning activities you're involved in will help you achieve these goals.

Having all this information in one easily accessible place makes it easier to track professional development and document one's credentials for employers, educational organizations, and even patients.

"Portfolios are gaining steam as the requirements and expectations for lifelong learning become stronger," says Ms. Allison.

Once you've collected the information, the question becomes where to store it. "If you're storing your document in a shoebox under your bed and are unfortunate enough to have a disaster, it all goes away," says Ken Dion, RN, MSN, MBA, founder of Decision Critical, Inc., based in Austin, Tex. His company offers online portfolio management. Mr. Dion suggests that clinicians should, at minimum, store all important documents on a CD and keep it in a safety deposit box.

But beyond the security aspect, an online portfolio can support NPs and PAs in staying organized. "It's more than an information repository. If a license is going to expire, our software will send an e-mail reminder 90 days ahead of time," says Mr. Dion. "Users can set reminders for goals they want to attain and even store their favorite teaching materials in the system, which can be downloaded from anywhere."

based in Florida, has sought new learning opportunities whenever she felt she had a “gap” in her knowledge base. She studied herbal medicine in order to learn more about alternative therapies; moonlighted in a family planning clinic to hone her gynecology skills; worked in a walk-in primary care clinic, where she dealt with

Of course, there is more to learning than clinical education. One component of being a well-rounded individual is having a broad range of interests. Lifelong learning can take the form of an intellectually stimulating hobby; in-depth reading on a subject of keen interest; curiosity about other cultures; mastering a new language; taking up or going back to playing a musical instrument; continuing your education outside of medicine; or closely following politics, world events, or current affairs.

urgent medical conditions; practiced at a student health center, where she became familiar with the needs of young adults; and trained in functional medicine.

“It’s been eclectic, which is how I’ve worked over the years. It’s all one big piece to me,” says Ms. Post.

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ity about other cultures; mastering a new language; taking up or going back to playing a musical instrument; continuing your education outside of medicine; or closely following politics, world events, or current affairs.

Abby Jacobson, MS, PA-C, enjoys both professional and personal learning. She loves to travel. “We take one big trip a year,” she says, and appreciates how her husband, who has a degree in history, can give her on-the-spot lectures about almost any location they visit. Last year their travels included the Czech Republic and Italy.

As for other personal learning, Ms. Jacobson and another PA lamented that every time they took a class together, it was about medicine; so they decided it was time to explore their options. “Twice a year we pick a class at our adult learning center of the local [craft store].” They recently took a sewing class and have signed up for rustic bread-making next. “I’m more of a cook than a baker,” says Ms. Jacobson, “but I guess that’s what the class is for.”