

New Roads for Health Management Education

When Aleksander Sallabanda, MD, director of the National Institute of Public Health in Tirana, Albania, envisions the future of health care in his country, he pictures it as a house in which health management serves as the roof over all other rooms--or areas--of the health care system, from primary care to health insurance. This new way of looking at health care will make it more efficient and cost effective, he told conference participants at a plenary session on health management education.

This same reconceptualization of health management was stressed at an invitational forum sponsored by AIHA and the Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) held one day prior to the conference. About 40 health management education partners, ministry representatives and other senior health management officials discussed ways to assure quality in health management education.

In many CEE countries, physicians have traditionally also played the role of administrator, but often with little training or long-term interest. As health care systems embark on the road to privatization, the role of health management has become increasingly vital. AIHA has paired universities and other educational institutions in Albania, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia with American university programs in health management education. The conference gave participants in the programs their first chance to learn more about partners' work in other countries.

"The key is that we have a cross-fertilizing environment in which we can share knowledge," said Roman Prymula, MD, PhD, head of the Health Service Management Group at Purkyne Medical Academy in the Czech Republic.

The invitational forum provided an opportunity for both Americans and Europeans to share their views of changing health care systems and accreditation of education programs. Health management continues to evolve on both continents, said Charles Brecher, PhD, professor of public administration at New York University.

"In the United States, a health manager used to be someone who kept the building clean and made sure that everyone showed up on time. As health care evolved, health management came to be an enterprise in and of itself. Now it is a blend of running institutions and running health insurance companies," Brecher said.

But how to best prepare students and practitioners for this transformation is a subject of debate.

"What is health management education? The simple answer is that it is a process in which individuals acquire intellectual and practical skills to enter management positions," said William Aaronson, AUPHA Faculty Fellow and a professor in the Department of Health Administration at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "The complex answer is that health management encompasses the role and function of health care in society. This does not have universal agreement, and therefore there are many models of health management education."

To help undertake the best programs--whether they are focused in medical schools, schools of public health, business schools or are part of a continuing education program--understanding the importance of program evaluation and needs assessment is essential, experts agreed in both the forum and plenary session.

Health management education programs are accredited in the United States by a team that reviews each program every eight years. In Europe, instead of formal accreditation, evaluations of programs are performed by peers.

"In the United States, all health management education programs are roughly the same shape. In Europe, it's very different. There is enormous variety. You have to find criteria you can apply in all the different countries. It's almost impossible to find criteria that will work across all those borders. That's why we have evaluation instead of accreditation," said Philip Berman, executive director of the European Health Management Association, which coordinates the evaluations.

Berman predicted that the number of health management education programs in CEE will expand over the next few years to meet a growing need for administrators to help shape health care reform and to keep an eye on the bottom line as concepts like cost-benefit ratios become increasingly important.

As health care managers in both the United States and CEE are pressed to make the case for spending scarce health care dollars on management training in addition to patient care, undertaking a needs assessment can help structure priorities, said Mary Paterson, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Health Care Administration at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.

With the help of American partners at Virginia Commonwealth University, a questionnaire was sent to 60 managers at Palack University Medical Facility in the Czech Republic to assess the most critical areas in theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Respondents identified the need for additional training in strategic planning, communications and team learning, said Ivan Gladkij, MD, PhD, a professor at Palack University.

Similarly, partners at South Bohemia University in the Czech Republic modeled an assessment of their technology needs on a survey done by University of Nevada at Reno, which evaluated computer capabilities throughout the state.

"The best thing we can do to help CEE is to come and tell you stories," said Eugene Schneller, PhD, a professor at the School of Health Administration and Policy at Arizona State University. "You can attune programs to the environment. We can give you examples, models. The rest is up to you."