

Enhancing Learning and Communications Through Computer Technology

With e-mail zipping between practitioners and partners, a Web page featuring hospital achievements and daily consultations with Medline, the century-old Zadar General Hospital is poised to enter the next century firmly entrenched in the information age. Like other CEE partner institutions, the hospital has been plugged into the Internet for only a short time, but already practitioners are finding its assistance invaluable, said Ozren Pesti, chief of the informatics department at Zadar General.

And partners will have more resources available to them in coming months, said Martin Saggese, AIHA's associate director for administration and chief financial officer. Information coordinators at each institution will participate in weeklong training this July to gain advanced skills. Also, this summer a mobile teleconferencing unit will begin travel among partnerships in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, offering institutions the opportunity for distance learning.

These advances in computer technology are "just the beginning of a larger issue for all your institutions--creation of an information systems department and a chief information officer," Saggese told conference participants. "This reallocation of resources is coming, to some sooner, some later. But you need to consider now how all this affects your employees and health systems."

New developments in information resources and technology are also shaping the ways health professional learn--whether in the university or via continuing education. At Virginia Commonwealth University, a distance learning program provides clinicians, middle-level managers and executives with continuing education in health administration, for example. The courses, taught via the Internet, include online lectures, interactive discussions among students and tests. Students visit the campus only five times during the two-year program.

Virginia Commonwealth partners at Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic hope to replicate the distance learning program. "The benefits outweigh the cost associated with it," said Ivan Gladkij, head of the Department of Social Medicine and Health Care Policy at the Faculty of Medicine at Palacky. "Students won't have to give up their professional work and income while learning. They will save time in transportation. And professors can be any place; for example, we could have a lecture by a professor in Prague [about 125 miles away]."

Also in the Czech Republic, health management educators are planning to use so-called "smart" classrooms at the University of Education in Hradec Kralove. These classrooms combine the resources of the Internet with video and audio technology to bring students the latest information. These enhanced classrooms are also planned for two other universities in the partnership, allowing faculty to enrich their distance learning offerings and explore possibilities for teaching to audiences in remote locations elsewhere in the Czech Republic.

Faculty and students must keep in mind that smart classrooms are only as intelligent as the faculty and students who make use of them, but they can augment the learning and teaching experience by bringing graphics, video, spreadsheets and other forms of presentation into the classroom, said Tracy Veach, EdD, associate dean for educational affairs at the University of Nevada School of Medicine.

Outside the university, telemedicine brings practitioners closer together to learn new techniques and share information. With a camera mounted on the ceiling in the operating room, doctors elsewhere at the hospital and at other institutions have a bird's-eye view of the procedures, said Richard Kennedy, vice president for operations at Women's and Infants

Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. The hospital has also used the technology to broadcast general rounds and conduct management workshops for nurses.

However, Kennedy cautioned, "I don't think the use of telemedicine is the way to create partnerships. I think partnerships require really good communication and good communication rebuilds trust and confidence in each other and that's better done face to face. But when it comes to sustaining partnerships and initiatives, telemedicine is very helpful."