

Evolution of the CRA and Accreditation

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The topic of accreditation is an important issue for learners, educators, regulatory bodies and the public in general.

What is accreditation and why is it important?

Accreditation, as it applies to medical education, is a process by which educators ensure that educational programs meet a certain defined standard. The standards attempt to ensure a high-quality unbiased product with defined educational characteristics, such as interactive audience participation. There is no question that the presence of these criteria is important to help maintain the integrity of medical teaching. It is important to the learners, the educators, the regulating bodies and the general public. This is not to say that so-called unaccredited programs do not have educational value. A teaching initiative may not qualify for accreditation for any number of reasons, some of which may be administrative. All of us have learned important material from unaccredited programs over the course of our careers.

Who does the accreditation in Canada?

Accreditation in Canada is generally carried out by approved accrediting bodies, most often through universities with medical faculties. Specialist societies may also qualify to become accrediting bodies. In order to qualify, strict criteria as laid out by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPS) must be adhered to. In essence, the ultimate accreditor in Canada is, in fact, the

RCPS. The RCPS sets the standards and rules for accreditation, and must approve any organization that applies to become an accrediting body. At present, the Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA) is in the process of applying to become an approved accreditor.

Is our annual CRA meeting accredited?

Our annual CRA meeting is definitely an accredited educational activity. The content of our annual scientific meeting is entirely under the control of the CRA. We meet all criteria for RCPS accreditation.

What about the satellite symposia at the CRA's annual meeting?

This has become a more difficult issue for the CRA and other specialist societies. For several years now, the CRA's Scientific Committee has invited industry sponsors to submit applications for symposia. Industry sponsors are made aware of the needs assessment of the membership. The merit of all applications for symposia are assessed blindly by the scientific committee, who then make suggestions for improvements; these suggestions are communicated back to the industry sponsors. The industry sponsors then have an opportunity to make changes to their application. Following any such changes, the scientific committee members reassess the applications and these are voted upon. The CRA believes that it has been able to maintain high-quality industry-sponsored symposia using this method of assessment; unfortunately, according to RCPS criteria, these symposia are not accreditable (*vide infra*). It should be mentioned that at the last two CRA annual meetings, there has been a "CRA symposium," which is entirely under the control of the CRA. This symposium would qualify for accreditation.

What is "tagging" and is it important to the CRA?

Currently, it is considered ethically permissible to link a session within an accredited group learning activity to the name of the sponsor (*i.e.*, a symposium) under certain conditions. When soliciting an educational grant from a sponsor for a session within an accredited group learning activity, a RCPS-accredited continuing professional development (CPD) provider must have independently, and prior to solicitation:



A casual Dr. John Thomson in front of the Royal College building in Ottawa, pondering accreditation and life in general.

- conducted a proper needs assessment;
- determined the topic and scientific content of the session;
- determined the speakers they intend to invite;
- included the following statement in the program materials, namely that “this session is supported in part by an educational grant from ...”; and
- ensured that each speaker invited to serve as a member of the faculty is fully informed about the decision to tag the name of the sponsor to the session.

If these conditions are met, the session (*i.e.*, symposium) in question is eligible for accreditation under Group 1.

As of June 2012, however, tagging to a specific session will no longer be permissible even under these conditions. Sponsors will only be recognized generally in the program.

At least 75% of our meeting is directly under our own control, and the issue of tagging and accreditation of industry-sponsored symposia does not affect this component. Nevertheless, the CRA is of the opinion that our method of vetting and choosing symposia has been rigorous and has allowed us to maintain high-quality industry-sponsored educational symposia. The reality of the RCPSC guidelines, however, is unlikely to change substantially and we will have to work within these guidelines. We are confident that our annual meeting is an extremely valued educational experience for our membership. Changes in regulations will not change the quality and attractiveness of our meeting.

What about the CRA accrediting its own events, including the Annual General Meeting (AGM)?

In the past, CRA events such as the AGM have received accreditation from university CME departments, including the University of Alberta (under Paul Davis as Director) and, more recently, the University of Western Ontario. It has become more difficult to meet the requirements of these University accreditors, as their mandate is rapidly evolving to meet and support their local needs. Thus, in keeping true to our Mission Statement “to support education of its members,” the CRA has embarked on the rather onerous task of being approved as an accrediting agency and fulfilling the robust requirements of the Royal College. Our Board and Executive believe that this represents a natural evolution in the maturation of our organization, one which will better allow it to respond to the learning needs of its members, and result in a more complete branding of the CRA members as “Experts in Arthritis Care.”

Is industry sponsorship important to the CRA?

Industry sponsorship at our annual meeting provides an important source of funding, thus allowing the CRA to function as the important and vital organization which it is today. The activities of the CRA are important, not only to rheumatologists, but to the rheumatology community at large, including people who have arthritis and other systemic conditions. Our educational initiatives (*i.e.*, annual meeting, web-based learning, *The Journal of the Canadian Rheumatology Association [CRAJ]* and *The Journal of Rheumatology*) are well-known and well-used by the membership. Initiatives in the area of human resources, such as the student preceptorships, have reaped very tangible benefits in terms of producing new rheumatologists. The Canadian Initiative for Outcomes in Rheumatology Care (CIORA), our research arm, has permitted important clinical research to occur across Canada. Exciting initiatives, including the much-anticipated and soon-to-be published CRA guidelines for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, are extremely important initiatives which will help practicing rheumatologists and raise the profile of Canadian rheumatology internationally.

Summary

Development of ongoing CPD activities, and their required accreditation, are best carried by specialist societies. The RCPSC does not have the mandate, expertise, or resources to carry out these important activities. We are hopeful that RCPSC regulations will not be so restrictive as to impede our abilities to carry out these important functions as a specialist society. The CRA is working on your behalf to help ensure the ongoing long-term viability of our organization.

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