

# HEALTH EDUCATION: A Key Priority at Merck Frosst

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Talking with Bob Davies, Vice-President, Health Education, Merck Frosst

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Bob Davies, Vice-President of Health Education, leads a large team of specialists with expertise in Health Education.

**W**hat trends does Merck Frosst see in health education (HE) in Canada which provide a catalyst for change for the company and the industry?

It has become evident that the pharmaceutical industry is not meeting the needs of health-care providers through the current sales and marketing model, including how HE is utilized by the industry. This is also evident by the decreasing productivity of the traditional sales force and HE activities. At the same time, the relationship between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry is being challenged by regulatory bodies, the media and patients with regard to each others' role in HE. This is important, as regulatory requirements for mandatory certification of competency will continue to increase the demand for professional development programs.

All of these trends caused us to reassess our approach to HE.

**H**ow is the HE group responding to these new trends?

As you may know, Merck Frosst was the first Canadian pharmaceutical company to use HE as a central component of our offerings to health-care providers. Over the years, we have developed considerable expertise and recognition, particularly for our Continuing Medical Education programs. So we had a solid base to work from in evolving our HE strategy.

It comes down to three guiding principles—Quality, Innovation and Partnership. *Quality* in terms of leading-edge, credible education; *Innovation* in terms of creative and effective program design; and *Partnership* in terms of assessing and truly meeting our customers' educational needs. We believe these three principles are the basis for any



Head office and field work together on leading-edge HE programs that respond to the needs of health-care providers. *From left to right:* Chantal Rochette, HE Group Manager; Bob Davies, Vice-President, HE; Jean Fortin, Regional HE Manager; and Dilip Patel, Director, HE-Field Operations.



*From left to right:* Paul Abbass, HE Group Manager; Bob Davies, Vice-President, HE; and Jeff Sidel, HE Director, discuss future e-learning HE programs.



A multidisciplinary approach is at the core of all HE programs. *From left to right:* Normand Dumoulin, HE Director; Bob Davies, Vice-President, HE; and Danielle Fagnan, HE Group Manager.

sustainable partnership with health-care providers whether through our people, our products or our services.

At the foundation of any partnership, there must be an alignment of common objectives, practices and philosophies. From a HE perspective, we share a common philosophy with Canadian physicians, academics and organized medicine providers, which is fundamental to ensuring effective partnerships with regards to accredited HE programs.

This philosophy advocates that HE must be designed to help physicians acquire, master or update their knowledge, skills or behaviours for the purpose of improving patient care. Because HE, by definition, supports an evidence-based approach to health care, we believe Merck Frosst is an ideal partner to address health-care providers' patient health outcomes. This is because of the importance we place on clinical evidence and the quality of our HE services, both of which lead to sustainable relationships.

## What opportunities/challenges, both internally and externally, do you face in making these changes?

From an internal perspective, the challenge has always been to recognize the value of HE beyond just supporting a product message. Essentially, this is a one-way street and does not provide value to our customer in terms of truly addressing their professional development needs. Fortunately, our internal colleagues increasingly recognize this paradigm shift.

Externally, the HE environment in Canada is crowded. There are other companies that are also beginning to understand this philosophy very well. Thus, as always, we are faced with the challenge of how to improve and differentiate our programs so that we continue to be recognized as the preferred partner. How will we do this?

First, we do HE *with* our customers and not *to* our customers. Actively partnering with them throughout the design, development and implementation process ensures that these programs are their programs. All our personnel receive in-depth training in adult learning principles from academic experts. The people involved in designing new HE programs are becoming more proficient in identifying and developing high-quality, innovative, accredited programs that meet the needs of health-care providers and reflect their local clinical realities. Feedback from health-care providers indicates we are on the right track with this strategy.

For example, our field team has partnered with major HE providers, such as the Fédération des médecins omnipraticiens du Québec and the Canadian Society of Internal Medicine, as well as with local medical clinics and community hospitals to implement customized and accredited HE programs. The goal of our field HE strategy is to build and leverage partnerships by focusing on local HE opportunities to ultimately deliver better care for the patient.

## How do you define success?

Contributing meaningfully as a partner towards optimizing patient health outcomes is at the heart of everything we do at Merck Frosst.

There are a number of ways to measure success, as you well know. One way is that those physicians who stopped attending industry-sponsored programs are starting to participate because of the improved educational quality of our HE programs.



Cross-functional team of professionals. From left to right: Silvana Mariani, Project Co-ordinator; Tessa Trasler, HE Group Manager; and Minda Miloff, HE Manager, work together on developing accredited learning programs for health-care providers.

However, at a more fundamental level there are two core measures of success. The first is to evaluate the impact of our HE interventions on changes in health-care professional behaviour. The second is to assess the strength of the relationship health-care professionals have with us as a result of our HE partnerships. We believe the better we achieve the first outcome, the better we will attain the second. As such, we are investing in understanding our customers' needs and evaluating educational and business outcomes.

By developing and implementing customized, high-quality and innovative educational interventions that meet physicians' professional development needs, whether it is at the national or, more importantly, at the local level, we are working hard to ensure that health-care providers view Merck Frosst as their preferred HE partner.

Stay tuned! **CPM**