



UNIVERSITY OF
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FACULTY OF
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Log-On To Higher Learning

Online CME Provides New Opportunities

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Advocates for interactive online CME courses tell us that online education offers advantages over courses offered in classrooms.

Some online courses are offered in a synchronous mode, that is, everyone participates at the same time. Others are offered in an asynchronous mode, in which people go online at different times of the day. Still, in others, the interaction is with the computer; these courses are essentially self-study exercises, with the computer providing information in response to questions asked.

Depending on the online format, advantages of this type of learning include the opportunity to pick the time of day for the course, the ability to proceed

with learning new content at one's own pace, and the possibility to interact and discuss issues with physicians across Canada and around the world.

There are many sites that offer online education. Memorial University in Newfoundland has developed a Web site with the assistance of other medical schools, including University of Calgary, University of Alberta, University of Ottawa, Queen's University, and University of Western Ontario. Visit <http://www.MDcme.ca> or <http://www.RuralMDcme.ca> for clinical practice guidelines, office tips, drug information, patient resources and online course listings.

Internet courses are a rich information source for urban, as well as rural, physicians. The University of Calgary hosts "MD Briefcase" (<http://www.mdbriefcase.com>), a site offering a variety of learning opportunities. Some of these

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courses are accredited, including case-based modules with interactive learning. The site also grants access to conference presentations and interactive discussion boards on topical issues. "Just the Berries" (<http://www.theberries.ca>) is another site providing online CME courses in Canada. A complete listing of Canadian accredited CME courses can be found at <http://www.netcantina.com/CanadianCME>. Dr. Bernard Sklar, a California physician and expert in medical informatics, has a Web site at <http://www.cmelist.com/list.htm>, which provides probably the most comprehensive listing of online courses.

In selecting an interactive online course, there are a few things to keep in mind (Table 1).

Your goals: What do you want to learn? Is it possible to learn the desired content or skills in an online format? For some content, online learning is quite appropriate. In areas, such as surgical skills, it may be difficult, although video streaming technology of procedures can offer advantages over print material.

Provider organisation: Who is providing the course? The organisation producing the course is as important in online education as other types of continuing medical education. Is the provider a university, hospital, medical association, or other group? Do the providers have the expertise to offer the content?

Content experts: Who has designed the course? Courses are designed by content experts. Check to see who has designed the course and verify their credentials.

Table 1

Considerations in choosing an online course

| |
|---|
| Your goals |
| Provider organisation |
| Content experts |
| Opportunity for active learning and participation |
| Clear description of content and objectives |
| Information about who the course is designed to reach |
| Group size |
| Facilitators |
| Price |
| Web site location |
| Accreditation |

Opportunity for active learning and participation: What is the opportunity for interactive learning? Both the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) state that accreditation at the MAINPRO-M-1 and Maintenance of Certification Section 1 course must include an opportunity for interaction. This interaction may be between the learner and the content expert, or between learners. These courses need to have specified start and stop dates. Facilitators/teachers should be checking the online discussions every day or two. Participants should be contributing to the discussion and interacting on a regular basis as well. In fact, the opportunity to learn is very limited when people do not interact.

Clear description of content and objectives: Is the course content clear? The course outline should

clearly describe the objectives for the course, provide a broad description of the content, and explicitly state what you can expect to gain.

Information about who the course is designed to reach: Is the course only for physicians, for physicians and other health professionals, or for the lay public? Courses cannot easily be all things to all people. It is important to determine whether the targeted audience for the program is likely to result in appropriate discussion and content for all learners.

Group size: Will the group taking the course be large or small? Small (10 to 20 participants) is probably optimal for online learning. If the group is too small, this may result in insufficient discussion to create a valuable learning experience. On the other hand, if the group is too large, this may discourage participation, particularly if the discussion is lengthy and unfocused.

Facilitators: Who will facilitate the course? What are his/her credentials and ability to steer the discussion? These factors are as important as knowing who designed the course. The facilitator will have to guide the discussion, but should have access to the content experts who designed the course. The discussion merits their input.

Price: How does the cost of the course compare to that of other courses? The cost of developing online courses is comparable and probably higher than face-to-face courses. Furthermore, they are less likely to be subsidised.

Web site location: The location of the Web site should be clear. Is the Web site that of the sponsoring

organisation? In the U.S., the Accreditation Committee for Continuing Medical Education stipulates that accredited CME cannot be provided on a pharmaceutical or device manufacturer's product Web site. The committee believes that a clear separation of promotion and education is required. Further, there must be clear notification that the learner is leaving the educational Web site. While links from an accredited provider to pharmaceutical and device manufacturers' product Web sites are permitted before or after the educational content of a CME activity, they cannot be embedded in the educational content of a

CME activity. Advertising of any type is prohibited within the educational content of CME activities on the Web, including, but not limited to, banner ads, subliminal ads, and pop-up window ads.

Accreditation: Are you interested in obtaining study credits? Is the learner or the course accredited? A course's accreditation status will tell you whether it has met the criterion that an official body (CFPC, RCPSC or American Medical Association) has established as the minimum requirement for an educational program.

There are many examples of courses offered on the Web that do not permit interaction with other participants. These should be examined as one would examine other resources, using many of the same criteria as provided earlier. Some may qualify for the CFPC's MAINPRO-M-2 and the RCPSC's Section 2 study credits. These courses would be subject to the number of hours of study credit that both organisations have established as criteria for self-study. [CME](#)

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