

ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL CONTINUING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES IN HEALTH CARE

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Abstract. *Any health care specialist – physician, physician’s assistant, nurse, nurse’s aid, midwife and other professionals of this field have to improve their professional skills, therefore it is important to go on learning to acquire the latest medical ideas and topicalities in the speciality, to get new knowledge, skills and competences. Professional growth and compliance with the respective field are assessed by a certification commission of any association and a certificate awarded which allows to do work in a health care field. The awarded certificate to a health care specialist serves as acknowledgement to one’s knowledge, skills and competences.*

In order to ease the ways for a specialist to improve knowledge, skills and competences, various courses, seminars and conferences are organized. By participation in these events specialists are awarded continuing education points, which have to be summed up thus giving an opportunity to prolong the the term for the acquired certificate.

Themes for continuing education programme are offered specifying particular fields of health care .It allows a specialist to choose those programmes which give a chance to ease the solution of the most topical problems in practice.

Keywords: *health care, professional continuing education*

Introduction

By means of co-financing by European Social Fund (ESF) many health care specialists are offered a chance to improve their knowledge, skills and competences in a particular professional field within the project activity programme „Human resources and employment” addendum 1.3.2.3. activities „Increase of level of skills and competences of the institutional staff involved in health care and health promotion process”. On May 19, 2008, the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations Nr.353 were adopted „Human resources and employment” addendum 1.3.2.3. activity „Increase of level of skills and competences of the institutional staff involved in health care and health promotion process”. The Cabinet of Ministers Regulations entered into force on May 28, 2008.

The project offers opportunities to improve one’s knowledge, skills and competences in 82 physician programmes, in 73 physician’s assistant programmes, in 74 nurses programmes, in 24 nurse’s aid programmes, in 30 midwife programmes and in 28 programmes for other specialists of the field. The project goal was – to ensure rendering of qualitative health care service and effective administration of the field, educating human resources in health care field and attracting them to the labour market, being in line with the national policy for sustained development of health care.

ESF co-financed project is the largest continuing education project implemented in Latvia for health care staff – being large as to the number of the trainees, as well as to the invested finances.

The project envisages free continuing education opportunities for more than 25 thousand Latvian health care workers in the whole of Latvia – physicians, physician's assistants, nurses, midwives and other specialists of the field.

The project is to be implemented within 72 months, i.e. from October 1, 2008 till December 31, 2014.

Several educational establishments are taking part in the project implementation – Latvian University, Rīga Stradiņš University and its substructures, as well as public organizations – Latvian Physicians' Association. Within the framework of the project implementation, there are envisaged theoretical classes, practical lessons and individual work lessons.

The aim of the study – to clarify the motivation and gains of health care specialists by participating in the continuing education programmes.

The study was carried out by the author within ESF project programme, doing the listeners' survey.

Review of continuing education programmes included in study

1. Informal continuing education programme for midwives in improving professional skills „Independent management of normal pregnancy”. Length of the programme – 28 hours, from which 10 hours are devoted to theory, 16 hours for doing practical work and 2 hours for individual work.

Theory included the lectures on the following themes – diagnostics of pregnancy and changes in a woman's body during pregnancy; chief principles of perinatal care, examination methods, maternity (prenatal) leave and timing of labor; fetal development, assessment methods of fetus position at different gestation periods; normal pregnancy management in practice; diagnostics of pathologic pregnancy in practice – bleeding during pregnancy, hypertension during pregnancy, preeclampsia, eclampsia, HELLP syndrome; pre-term labour, premature fetus, fetal hypotrophy; prolonged gestation; pregnancy and extragenital diseases.

Practical lessons were realized under supervision of a doctor-gynaecologist at a specialist's place of practice. During lessons the midwife had to do an individual assessment of normal pregnancy, as well as its analysis lasting for several weeks, not over-exceeding the number of hours envisaged in the project. Individual work involved the study of legislative acts. The main task was to analyze the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations Nr.611, which determines the algorithm of pregnancy assessment in Latvia.

200 midwives, practicing in the territory of Latvia, got involved in the study.

2. Continuing education programme for nurses and physician's assistants „Training of nurses and physician's assistants involved in family doctor's practice in health promotion and public health issues”. The author participated in

the cycle of the programme – implementation of solution of health issues of the young people, women and men. In this cycle 5 hours were devoted to the theory and 5 hours to practical training.

Theory included the lectures on the following themes – the basic counseling principles for the young people, women and men addressing family planning issues in a family doctor's practice; risk factors affecting reproductive health at different age groups; family planning, types of contraception, basic principles in hormonal contraception choice, side effects, effect on the human body; counseling on reproductive health issues in various age groups; a woman's consultation as to the choice of contraception method.

During practical lessons the audience was divided into small groups (5 individuals) to solve practical tasks, which were presented at the end of the lesson. Themes of these lessons were equated to the theoretical part, thus giving a chance to go deeper into the problem.

480 nurses and physician's assistants practicing in family doctor's practices in Latvia were involved in the programme of the project.

3. Continuing education programme for family doctors, nurses and physician's assistants „Topicalities-news in children and adolescents' health care". The author participated in the cycle of the programme – topicalities of children and adolescent (girls) reproductive organ system problems. In this cycle 6 hours were devoted to theory and 2 hours to practical training.

Theory included the lectures on the following themes – physiological specificities of genital organs in girls at different ages; diseases of external and internal genital organs of girls (causes, manifestations, diagnostics, available treatment); disorders of ovarian-menstrual cycle (causes, manifestations, diagnostics, available treatment) in girls at childhood, teenage and adolescent age; developmental anomalies of reproductive organ system in girls; sexuality of youngsters (first visit to a gynaecologist, hygienic problems for girls, pregnancy and its interruption); violence against girls; examination methods of reproductive organ system of girls.

During practical lessons the audience was divided into small groups (5 individuals) to solve practical tasks which were presented at the end of the lesson. During the lessons family doctors and nurses and physician's assistants working in family doctor's practices were analyzing their action on suspicions about and the already-diagnosed reproductive organ system diseases in girls at childhood, teenage and adolescent age.

240 trainees got involved in the programme of the project – family doctors practicing in Latvia and nurses and physician's assistants working at family doctor's practices.

4. Continuing education for doctors-gynaecologists, family doctors, midwives, nurses and physician's assistants „Menopause: health disorders related to it and maintenance of female life quality". The author participated in the cycle of the

programme – menopause period in view of a gynaecologist. In this cycle 4 hours were devoted to theory and 1,5 hours to practical training.

Theory included the lectures on the following themes – clinical manifestations of menopause period; female sexual functions in menopause; use of hormone-substitution therapy for women in menopause.

During practical lessons the audience was divided into small groups (5 individuals) to solve practical tasks which were presented at the end of the lesson. The themes were equated to theoretical part, thus giving a chance to go deeper into the problem.

240 trainees got involved in the programme of the project – gynaecologists practicing in Latvia, family doctors, nurses and physician's assistants.

5. Continuing programme for emergency medicine staff „Topicalities-news in ensurance of emergency medical aid”. The author participated in the cycle of the programme – emergency cases in obstetrics. In this cycle 2 hours were devoted to theory and 2 hours to practical training.

Theoretical material included critical situation analysis in obstetrics, its diagnostics and operating principles in emergency situations.

In practical training lessons the audience was divided into 2 groups (10 individuals) to assess critical cases, to solve practical tasks and to take practical action in childbirth on dummies.

In the programme of the project were involved 800 practicing specialists working in emergency medicine service in Latvia.

Analysis of motivating factors in life-long learning

Life-long learning is characterized from different points of view. One of the explanations of this concept is based on voluntary, motivated and long-lasting professional education, (DES, 2000) which not only improves one's social integration in the society life, but active, independent and personality development for a competitive professional environment (CEC, 2006).

Leslie Watkin and professor *Clint Taylor* (CSULA) in 1993, Temple City Unified School District, describe the life-long learning as learning, that takes place not in a classroom in one's childhood, but is going on all life long in different life situations. During last fifty years, the constant innovation changes in science and technology have influenced the needs for learning and the learning style. Learning, in the context of life-long learning, cannot be divided into time and space, where knowledge is acquired (school) and where it is used (place of work). (Fischer, 2000) Nowadays, life-long learning can be considered as regular acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences in daily interaction with the world around us.

Self-targeted life-long learning in health care field is an indispensable component in the improvement of patients' health care process. By learning and acquiring the latest opportunities in the disease diagnostics and treatment, there increases a chance to prevent them timely, thus not allowing the patient to

change his/her life and work quality. Any health care specialist, by getting involved in the life-long learning process, can independently evaluate and ground his/her professional work.

Quite commonly the health care specialists make use of the aphorism – to excel in one's professional field, you have to keep learning from the cradle to the grave. Medical schools cannot teach all that is needed for further professional work, therefore learning has to be continued also after its completion in the professional environment. If a person does not go on learning, a health care professional gets into routine, becomes dissatisfied with everything and quickly burns out.

Within the framework of the study, prior to discussion of themes included into the programme, each participant was handed a questionnaire to mark those factors, suggested by the author, which seemed to be the decisive ones for the participants to attend these courses.

The offered motivating factors for continuing education were as follows:

- Necessity to get credit points for recertification;
- To refresh one's knowledge;
- To get new knowledge;
- To acquire new practical skills;
- An interesting theme offered;
- Free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work.

The respondents of the study – participants of continuing education courses could point to several significant factors.

The obtained results show:

1. Response frequency of doctors was graded as follows – necessity to get credit points for recertification 240 (100%), refresh one's knowledge 198 (82,5%), acquire new practical skills 104 (43,3%), an interesting theme offered 98 (40,8%), free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work 84 (35%), get new knowledge 81 (33,8%).
2. Physician's assistants graded their responses as follows – necessity to get credit points for recertification 387 (96,8%), refresh one's knowledge 349 (87,3%), free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work 286 (71,5%), acquire new practical skills 267 (66,8%), get new knowledge 259 (64,8%), an interesting theme offered 195 (48,8%).
3. Nurses graded their responses as follows – necessity to get credit points for recertification 317 (99,1%), free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work 302 (94,4%), refresh one's knowledge 276 (86,3%), acquire new practical skills 245 (76,6%), get new knowledge 239 (74,7%), an interesting theme offered 209 (65,3%).
4. Midwives graded their responses as follows – refresh one's knowledge 235 (97,9%), necessity to get credit points for recertification 201 (83,8%), free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work 198 (82,5%),

an interesting theme offered 192 (80,0%), get new knowledge 189 (78,8%), acquire new practical skills 184 (76,7%).

5. Emergency medicine service staff graded their responses as follows – get new knowledge 783 (97,9%), acquire new practical skills 781 (97,6%), necessity to get credit points for recertification 776 (97,0%), refresh one's knowledge 769 (96,1%), free of charge benefits to get new ideas useful in professional work 763 (95,4%), an interesting theme offered 743 (92,9%).

According to the obtained results, health care specialists (physicians, physician's assistants, nurses), who are mainly doing ambulatory duties, are attending continuing education courses due to the necessity to get credit points, while specialists (midwives, emergency medicine staff), who are mainly engaged in professional work, are interested to get new knowledge or to refresh the existing one. For consolidation of new knowledge, skills and competences, it is important that a specialist has an issued methodological material, which could be used to search for the answers, in case there arises an urgent problem concerning a patient in the health care process.

Methodological materials in continuing education programmes

Within ESF co-financed project, each programme was developed by introducing methodological material, which after completion of courses could be used by health care specialists in solution of practical cases. Knowledge, skills and competences in professional activities can be improved by getting the necessary information in a certain field of work. At present it is eased by the development of information technologies and specialists' skills to use them for acquiring the necessary information.

In the development of methodological material there are set specific requirements that the number of pages cannot exceed the amount of hours devoted to learning of theoretical knowledge. As a result, the authors of this methodological material are limited in the description of theory, which might be of importance to professionals who are doing their practical work. Methodological material looks more like the chief guidance material in solution of problems discussed in the courses. For any producer of a certain programme, it is important to understand that his/her material covered would reach the target audience – health care specialists in those cases if a patient is referring to him with a problem discussed in the courses. Since the methodical material is of enduring value, those who produce it bear responsibility to develop it in a concise manner and it should be understood by a particular professional. Producers of methodological material always refer to the latest literature, which deals more in detail with these problems.

During the study the satisfaction of the audience with the methodological material was analyzed. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to evaluate its quality – by marking in Likert scale the evaluation from 1 to 5,

where 1 – very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – good, 4 – very good, 5 – excellent. The most common evaluation among respondents was 4 – 1279 (65,3%).

After discussion of theoretical material and practical training lessons, during which the participants could use the methodological material, the discussion started on the significance of these courses in their practical work. It urged the authors to analyze the ideas which the participants considered as their gains at the end of these courses.

Benefits of health care specialists from continuing education programmes offered

Any health care field specialist would be able to estimate the acquired knowledge, skills and competences in continuing education programmes only after some time, when they come across the problem in their practical work. In order health care specialists could more successfully apply the acquired knowledge, skills and competences in their practical work, one should consider certain principles which are defined for health care specialists. These principles should be taken in account also for the society in total. Self-targeted life-long learning is an indispensable component for any specialist working in health care field (Brennan et al., 2002; Blank et al., 2003). Significance of life-long learning in specialists' practice is described in physicians' chart, signed by more than 120 countries and international organizations (Brennan, Blank, et al., 2002). The necessity for life-long learning is determined by regular specialists' certification. The acquired certificate, allowing to practice in one's speciality after finishing the residency, has to be regularly prolonged. It has to be done in a certain period of time (5 years), collecting a set number of continuing education points. Such activities promote the wish for self-education and inclusion in life-long learning. The ones, employed in health care field, have difficulties with self-assessment because there exist limited abilities to evaluate oneself precisely (Davis, 2006). Participants of continuing education programmes were offered at the end of the day to write their individual benefits in a certain cycle. Since they were given the task to answer on the benefits of this cycle in a written form, the results were analyzed by using the content analysis (see Table 1) looking for finding essential assumptions, identification of general theoretical categories, to form more comprehensive explanatory concepts (Kroplijs, Raščevska, 2004). Since the qualitative research is targeted at the study (Heron, 1992) of respondents' answers (n=1960) as to the acquired knowledge based on experience or work placement and the benefits gained in a specific course, the author wanted to specify, what categories and notions the respondents are using in order to structure their knowledge and skills acquired. The information obtained revealed the respondents' subjectively generalized understanding on the benefits experienced. Analyzing the written responses, not every word was interpreted but a statement was identified, which expressed the most essential thought in reference to the study context. The results of the analysis process was

directed from a specific statement of a particular respondent, to a more general or more abstract scientific statement, which can overlap many cases.

Table 1

Analysis of benefits of health care specialists

<i>Content units</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Notion</i>
<p>I repeated already known things</p> <p>I saw the known from a different aspect</p> <p>Teacher explained the forgotten things very skilfully</p>	Positive feedback	Social relationship
<p>Acquired knowledge and skills will allow to do work better</p> <p>Acquired knowledge and skills will reduce the stress communicating with a patient</p> <p>I will more often dare to consult the patient on my own, rather than refer him/her to a specialist</p> <p>After the lessons many unclear things got more understandable</p>	Orientation to success at work	Stress due to work
<p>An opportunity was given to learn the known things more in-depth, which has to be favoured</p> <p>I would wish to have a discussion about very painful problems at work more often</p> <p>Acquired knowledge and skills remind on significance of life-long learning</p>	Wish for self-education and openness to the new	Motivation

Conclusions

Continuing education programme gives a chance to health care field specialists acquire new knowledge, skills and competences and to refresh the existing professionals skills. By learning and acquiring the latest disease diagnostic and treatment possibilities, the patient’s health care process is going to improve.

Health care specialists’ motivation to attend continuing education programmes unfortunately most commonly deals with the possibility to get points for recertification, rather than acquire new knowledge, skills and competences. Motivation to attend continuing education programmes differ between

professionals - those who spend their work in ambulatory institutions, from specialists who spend their daily work actively in in-patient institution.

Methodical material is concentrated on description of a certain theme, which eases a specialist, in case of need, to get involved and solve the problem. Methodical material summarizes the latest medical concepts and reveals new opportunities in solution of topical problems in the process of patient care.

The benefit of continuing education programmes for health care field specialists is the opportunity to look at habitual things from a different point of view. By talking about the experience of other countries and discussing the significance of patient education, it is easier to understand the benefits in a particular situation. Regularly implementing one's own self-education, any health care field specialist acquires new knowledge, skills and competences for professional activities.

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