

Problem-based learning: librarians and the education of health professionals

The 1990s are an exciting time for the education of health professionals in Australia. Three Australian medical schools, Flinders, University of Queensland, and the University of Sydney are adopting the US model and converting to graduate rather than undergraduate programs. Together with many other Australasian medical schools they will develop an integrated, problem-based curriculum, in place of the more traditional approach to teaching medicine. The problem-based approach is also being adopted throughout Australasian in the education of other health professionals such as nurses and physiotherapists.

What are the implications of a problem-based curriculum for the librarians who are responsible for providing resource support and reader education?

The implications are profound and to fully grasp them it is necessary to understand that the problem-based approach to education involves a fundamental shift in philosophy. The emphasis is on learning rather than teaching. In a problem-based curriculum there are very few didactic lecturers in which the student has no role other than to passively listen. Instead, students take responsibility for their own learning in a self-directed learning environment.

Students decide on their educational objectives (learning goals) and devise appropriate means to meet them. In a problem-based course, students are presented with a sequence of prepared real-life problems, which they work

through with the guidance and advice of a tutor. Students decide what information they require in order to progress through the problem and where they should find that information. Students actively take responsibility for their own learning.

The problem-based course, with its emphasis on self-directed learning, relies very heavily on information skills and good library and information resources. The range of material provided, the depth of reader education, the involvement of the library in the acquisition by students of lifelong information skills, intimate knowledge by library staff of the problem-based curriculum — all these factors are more complex in a program based on self-directed learning.

In late May 1995, the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle will be holding a conference that will address many of the questions that both educators and librarians ask about problem-based learning.

The undergraduate medical program at Newcastle accepted its first students in 1978 and from its very beginning has had a problem-based, integrated curriculum. It is recognised internationally as an innovator and leader in this type of education and has provided advice and consultation to medical and health educators wishing to adopt a problem-based approach, both here in Australia and overseas. In conjunction with the Biomedical Library of the University of Newcastle and the teaching hospital libraries it has developed a

successful information and resource management program that meets the needs of students.

The conference is called *Imperatives in medical education: beyond problem-based learning* and will be held from 28-31 May 1995. The focus will be on the practical aspects of implementation and maintenance of a problem-based, integrated curriculum. The information needs of students and the demands made on libraries by such a curriculum will be a particular focus of the conference. Active student participation will be a feature and participants will have the opportunity to observe problem-based tutorials. This will bring home to them the implications of such an approach to learning.

There will also be an emphasis on medical informatics and computer-assisted learning. The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle was recently awarded a federal grant through the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching to develop an electronic clearing house of innovative teaching material in medicine, health sciences and nursing.

Any librarian involved or soon to be involved in a problem-based curriculum for health professionals will benefit from attending the conference.

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