The Value of Continuing Education in the Health Professions

Substantial literature exists indicating that continuing education (CE) in the health professions is effective in improving healthcare, patient outcomes and population health. The value of CE can be optimized by a commitment to research and scientific evidence, a focus on quality measures and outcomes, and a team-based, interprofessional approach.

What is CE?

According to the Institute of Medicine, “Continuing Education is the process by which health professionals keep up to date with the latest knowledge and advances in health care.”¹ It is the application of that knowledge that leads to improved individual and population outcomes.

During the past decade, CE has evolved dramatically to focus on changing healthcare practice and improving performance and quality. This new focus has led CE professionals to embrace the concept of a team-focused, interprofessional approach that is based upon evidence of quality gaps, linked to individual and/or group performance, and measured in terms of improved competence, performance and outcomes.

New criteria are emerging for individual learning and improvement to satisfy maintenance of licensure, maintenance of certification, ongoing professional practice evaluation, pay for performance, and other requirements. CE professionals are increasingly expected to assist healthcare professionals not only to identify and address knowledge and performance gaps, but also to document learning and change for the healthcare professional’s lifelong learning portfolio.

Why is CE Important?

Data show that quality CE fosters quality patient care.² Due to many factors, including the tremendous pace of innovation and discovery in medicine, a lag exists from the time knowledge is generated until healthcare professionals have absorbed that knowledge and translated it into practice. To speed the adoption of best practices, CE professionals must identify quality gaps and performance issues, understand the barriers that contribute to sub-optimal performance, offer education that will impact the quality of care being delivered, and measure change.

How is CE Designed and Delivered?

Through the years, CE has been delivered in a variety of formats, including face-to-face, via electronic means and even at the point-of-care. Recently, new designs are evolving to provide more cost-effective methods to deliver and measure the outcomes of performance and quality improvement activities and to allow interprofessional team members to interact and learn together. While education providers traditionally have operated in education “silos,” it is becoming increasingly clear that education activities must be integrated with quality activities (e.g., identification and development of measures, practice guidelines, registries, safety and quality initiatives) to optimize patient care. In some cases, organizations are able to integrate quality and educational activities within their own institution. In other cases, collaborations with external organizations provide the best options for identifying gaps, designing and measuring change. In addition, inclusion of representatives of the healthcare team in the planning and delivery strengthens activities and is expected to lead to improved understanding and care.

Call to Action

The Alliance calls CE providers to continue to advance the profession and increase the value of CE by: (1) coordinating educational activities with internal quality departments, governmental agencies, and other internal and external quality organizations to fully recognize healthcare gaps and disparities and to advance the shared goal of improved patient care and outcomes, (2) including members of the interprofessional team in the design and delivery of activities, and (3) publishing the results of experiences, including outcomes data, whenever possible.
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References

CME Effectiveness Articles


About the Alliance

The Alliance for Continuing Education in the Health Professions (ACEHP) is a community dedicated to its mission of accelerating excellence in healthcare performance of all health profession educators through education, advocacy and collaboration.

http://www.acehp.org