

INTERNET RELAY CHAT FOR CONTINUING MEDICAL EDUCATION: THE HISTORIC FIRST CHAT CONFERENCE OF THE UP COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

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INTRODUCTION

Information technology has become integrated in almost every process of our daily lives. In the field of medicine, the computer has proven to be an effective communication tool. Combined with the Internet, it can offer new revolutionary teaching modalities for the delivery of continuing medical education (CME). The UP College of Medicine, being the premiere medical college in the country, aims to maintain leadership in the field by taking advantage of the increased audience reach and affordability of this innovative technology.

One of the components of the Internet is the Internet Relay Chat - also called "irc" - or simply, chat. By exchanging text messages cheaply through Internet, an interaction previously achieved only through expensive telephone calls was made possible. The ability to exchange ideas through a distance is what makes chat a popular Internet application for the young. But the IRC can achieve more than just small talk. If it can carry text messages, it can definitely carry controversial content on a much higher intellectual and academic level.

With this hypothesis, the UPCM planned on maximizing the chat facility to an advantage by delivering continuing medical education through Internet Relay Chat.

Currently, major medical schools in the US and Europe are already offering their own CME programs on the Internet. But foreign CME is not creditable locally. In the Philippines, only local continuing professional education (CPE) providers, like the UPCM, can offer such units.

The objective of the Internet Relay Chat is to deliver CPE-accredited postgraduate medical education using Internet relay chat.

METHODOLOGY

A chat event is divided into three phases: the pre-conference, the chat proper, and the post-conference phases.

The pre-conference starts with a brainstorming by the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine and the Medical Informatics Unit for a particular topic of interest. Once a topic is chosen, faculty members from the college are selected to be experts for the event. A date and time for the event are then set and e-mail invitations sent to medical professionals on the Internet. They are requested to register online by sending mail to the moderator. Upon registration, pre-registrants receive electronic documents written by the experts pertaining to the topic. These documents are to be read by the pre-registrants prior to the chat event and are given corresponding CPE values. Pre-registrants are also encouraged to send their questions by e-mail before the event.

For the chat proper, the three experts are made available online in an Internet cafe. A

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physician-moderator screens the questions fielded by participants. The moderator's duty is to eliminate duplicate questions to the same expert and to ensure coherence in the discussion.

For the post-conference phase, a questionnaire is sent to the participants to get their comments and suggestions.

RESULTS

For its first offering, the UP College of Medicine through its Postgraduate Institute of Medicine chose Tuberculosis as its topic. Selected experts for this chat were acknowledged stalwarts in the field. Dr. Camilo C. Roa (immediate past president of the Philippine Coalition Against Tuberculosis [PHILCAT], pulmonology), Dr. Jaime C. Montoya (incumbent president of the PHILCAT, infectious diseases), and Dr. Salvacion R. Gatchalian (Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society of the Philippines, pediatrics), Dr. Alvin B. Macelo of the Medical Informatics Units served as moderator and Dr. Ayedee Domingo of Intermed Online was co-moderator.

Each of the experts prepared a document on his particular field of practice and this was sent to participants ahead of time. Online registration was started March 18, 1998.

A total of 146 pre-registered for this chat event. Table 1 shows the distribution of the pre-registered participants by specialization and by location. Of these, 56 took advantage of the chance to ask questions by e-mail prior to the event.

Pre-conference documents for this event were varied. Dr. Roa chose an unpublished paper on multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. Dr. Montoya chose a published article on PCR's for the diagnosis of TB. Dr. Gatchalian preferred a frequently asked questions (FAQ) format.

The chat conference on TB was held at the Cybercafe Robinson's Galleria on February 25, 1998 from 7 PM to 9 PM. Wyeth Philippines sponsored the event.

There are several advantages of the internet relay chat as a mode of delivery for CME:

1. It offers significant savings on travelling for both the experts and the participant.
2. It is able to automatically save a complete transcript of the proceedings. This allows for easy distribution of the knowledge even after the event.
3. It allows participants a one-to-one interaction with the experts - an opportunity they do not normally achieve with conventional conferences and lectures.
4. It removes the face-to-face contact between participants and experts making them less inhibited and more candid in their questions and answers.
5. It is able to transmit the same amount of knowledge usually gained in more expensive lectures and meetings.
6. Participants are not limited to those in the Philippines. Expatriates who wish to earn their units may do so.
7. It is easy to maintain a database of the participants since registration is made electronically.
8. The event is enough reason for some practitioners to get an Internet connection.

There were also some disadvantages of this mode.

1. There was no reliable way to determine if the participant actually read the pre-conference documents.
2. There was no reliable way to determine if the participant was really the person who he says he is.
3. There was no reliable way to determine if the person in the chat area during the chat proper was really the person who registered.
4. Because of the lack of inflections in text-based messaging, there was a potential for some of the questions to be brash, arrogant, and disrespectful.
5. Not all medical professionals on the Internet had the technical skill to reach the chat area and join the discussions.
6. Distribution of certificates of

completion was still done through conventional mail. This becomes an additional cost for the College.

7. Invitations were sent mostly through electronic mail. A significant number of practitioners were not informed of the event because they did not have Internet connections.

In summary, the Internet Chat conference is a viable mode for delivering continuing medical education. It requires some

minimum level of knowledge on the ways of the Internet to be able to join the event. It offers a potential for improving delivery of continuing medical education to our colleagues in remote areas of the country at minimal cost.

REFERENCE

Petersen R. Linux, The Complete Reference. Osborne: McGraw Hill, 1996.