

## Virtual seminars for disseminating medical nutrition education curriculum ideas<sup>1,2</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** There is a need and a desire for educators working toward implementation of nutrition in medical schools and residency programs to share ideas and materials. The World Wide Web enables computer-mediated communications through which a medical nutrition curriculum could be discussed; however, existing formats lack focus and structure. In January 1999, a virtual seminar that focused on nutrition education in medical schools and residency programs was conducted. The seminar, titled "Making Room for Nutrition Education," was sponsored by organizations that have active medical nutrition educators. The seminar included 5 topics discussed over a 4-d period. The transcript was made available at <http://www.preventivenutrition.com>. There were 119 registered participants. Responses to a postseminar questionnaire were positive; there was interest in an ongoing series of virtual seminars. *Am J Clin Nutr* 2000;71:1403–4.

**KEY WORDS** Nutrition education, family medicine, nutrition curriculum, CD-ROM, World Wide Web, medical educators, virtual seminars

In preparing a review of medical nutrition education in family medicine, we were impressed with the scope and quality of existing medical nutrition education texts, curriculum outlines, CD-ROM programs, and World Wide Web-based modules (1). However, there appears to be no easy or cost-effective way to access most of these educational materials. Medical nutrition educators report difficulty in finding publishers to distribute nutrition curriculum materials. We also find that the opportunities for faculty to discuss their curriculum innovations are limited. There is no one professional organization that attracts all of the medical nutrition educators to its meetings. And although organizations including the American Society for Clinical Nutrition and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biologies sponsor symposia and original-contribution sessions on nutrition curricula, attendance at those sessions has been modest. The literature is filled with reports describing the barriers to nutrition education in medical schools and residency programs, including the limited time that faculty can devote to the subject. We believe that there is a need and a desire for educators who are working toward the implementation of nutrition in medical schools and residency programs to share ideas and materials.

There is a growing body of literature describing virtual learning communities on the World Wide Web (2, 3). After reviewing that

literature, we were impressed that the Web might be a place for medical educators to meet and share ideas. Although there are listserves, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and other computer-mediated communications through which a medical nutrition curriculum could be discussed, those formats currently lack focus and structure. Thus, as part of our National Cancer Institute R25 dissemination grant, we experimented with the virtual seminar format.

In January 1999 we hosted a virtual seminar, a variation of a Web-based threaded discussion, focused on nutrition education in medical schools and residency programs. We selected the virtual seminar format because it is a familiar environment for faculty. In that format, experts make presentations, a moderator manages audience participation, and a transcript or record of proceedings is produced. The seminar was cosponsored by organizations that have active medical nutrition educators, including The American Society for Clinical Nutrition, The Institute of Nutrition, The University of North Carolina, The Society for Nutrition Education, The Society for Teachers of Family Medicine, and Nutrition Educators of Health Professionals (a dietetic practice group of the American Dietetic Association). Announcements for the seminars were posted to 2 nutrition and 2 medical education listserves with a combined membership of  $\approx 800$  and were mailed to curriculum deans at medical schools in the United States and Canada. The seminar, titled "Making Room for Nutrition Education," was targeted toward faculty who were interested in the development and implementation of a nutrition curriculum for medical students and primary care residents.

The seminar included 5 topics discussed over a 4-d period by nationally recognized medical educators. The experts' introductory statements were posted on a Web page that hosted the virtual seminar a week before the seminar, along with the real times that experts would be available. The seminar was open for posting 8 h/d; however, the experts were available for limited real-time discussion. When the experts were available, there was a lag (<10 min) from the time a participant sent a comment to the posting of the reply. Participants engaged the expert via e-mail. The moderator

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**TABLE 1**  
Attendance at the seminar "Making Room for Nutrition Education"


Topic	Speaker	Registered users	Total hits	Browsing hits	Postings
Integrating Nutrition Education Throughout the Predoctoral Curriculum at the University of Arizona	Doug Taren	40	851	387	25
The Development and Use of Textbooks, Web Sites, and Other Medical Resource Materials	Lisa Hark, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine	42	412	169	14
How the Nutrition Faculty at the University of Texas Medical Schools Cooperated Over Distance to Provide a Medical Nutrition Education Course	Marilyn Edwards, University of Texas Houston Medical School	49	252	50	17
The Use of CD-ROM Independent Study Modules for Nutrition Education	Steven Zeisel, University North Carolina, Chapel Hill	23	106	16	10
Nutrition in Family Medicine Residency Programs	Kathy Kolasa and George Poehlman, East Carolina University	22	97	17	5

categorized the questions to facilitate participants who wanted to follow specific themes. The transcript was made available at <http://www.preventivenutrition.com>. Over the 4 d, there were 119 registered participants and a fair amount of activity (**Table 1**).

One month later, a 17-item questionnaire was e-mailed to 47 participants who consented, at registration, to answer a post-seminar survey. Twelve (25%) of those participants responded. Five percent of the e-mail surveys were returned as undeliverable. The response to the seminar from all the survey respondents was positive. The participants noted that they 1) were able to network with people they had not met previously, 2) became aware of funding sources and resources, and 3) received confirmation for some of their current ideas as well as new educational strategies. These benefits of participation came without the need to travel and with minimal disruption to work schedules. The speakers all received excellent evaluations on 1) the new information presented, 2) the quality of the interactions, and 3) the speakers' responses to questions. Participants attended for an average of 2 d and spent an average of 2.5 h at the seminar.

Respondents to the survey suggested interest in an ongoing series of virtual seminars, volunteered to be panelists, and recommended that the seminar be held at different times of the day. One respondent noted that, as a result of participating, she had already incorporated an idea into a third-year medical student clerkship session. Another respondent suggested that ease of printing needed to be improved and computer glitches eliminated. We found, however, that many of the participants who experienced glitches were novice users of Internet technology and most glitches were due to the user's lack of familiarity with their own Web browsers and hardware.

We were a bit surprised that, despite the high volume of traffic to the site (1708 hits), most visitors did not post comments or questions (there were only 66 postings). We do not know how to interpret that finding. Interestingly, only one of the survey respondents had actually posted an item during the seminar. The Corporation for Research and Education Networking (CREN), a nonprofit higher education member organization, described experimenting with a similar structured and informal learning outreach for its information technology professionals (3). The audience and participation at CREN's virtual seminars grew over time. It was thought that these expert events are popular because they provide a structure; given the time crunch that professionals face, "anywhere" and "anytime," often used to describe Web-based materials, can translate to "never" and "nowhere."

We believe that the virtual seminar "Making Room for Nutrition Education" was a success and provides a model for computer-mediated communications among medical educators that nutrition organizations could adopt. The World Wide Web could host a virtual community of medical nutrition educators that could work toward the adoption of more uniform and high-quality nutrition education in our medical schools and residency programs. 

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