

Small groups but a big task

Claire McNicholas

Small group CME started back in the early 1980s

with three groups established in 1983. By 1993 there were 28 tutors, a further two in 2001 and now in 2009 there are 37 tutors. The more recent increase in tutor numbers has allowed faculties in large counties to have two tutors, particularly Kerry, Tipperary, Mayo and Donegal.

There are two strands to being a CME tutor, the main strand being on the ground working with local faculty members. The other strand is attending three workshops each year.

Once appointed, the tutor contacts all the GPs in the area and establishes small groups, the average being four groups. They develop a curriculum for the year and organise a programme. Obviously they have to resource the topics as part of their work. Some tutors have group leaders and they will have to brief and debrief them before the meetings. Many tutors lead all or most of their groups themselves. The topics that are chosen must be common, important and a problem. The overall aim of these small groups is to increase knowledge and skills, and at times maybe change attitudes.

A tutor needs to be well organised and have the groups notified on a monthly basis either by letter, e-mailing or texting. Some groups meet in individual GPs homes, other groups use local hospitals or health board premises. A tutor usually liaises with the groups to see what areas they want to cover. In the main, tutors cover a similar area in all groups each month so as not to have an overload of topics to prepare.

Many methods are used to deliver this type of learning. These include peer review of consultations either by random case analysis, problem case analysis and sometimes video recordings.

Practice organisation can be carried out by doing a practice visit, a review of medical records, reviewing the doctor's bag or looking at practice leaflets. Audit is often carried out

by developing a protocol, doing practice activity analysis or learning needs analysis. Other miscellaneous teaching methods include brainstorming, simulated cases, role-play, practical or skills sessions, critical incidence analysis, use of an expert resource or critical reading. There is always scope to introduce a hot topic at short notice that may be relevant eg. new cervical screening programme, new vaccination regimes etc.

On the ground the tutor is the educational officer of the local faculty and so can liaise with the sessions held at the faculty meetings to dovetail with the small group content. Some have strong links with their local hospitals and get involved with organising study days. Some tutors sit on GP liaison committees of the local hospitals and some tutors are regular contributors to the various medical journals.

It is estimated that 50% of GPs attend small group meetings each month and approximately 70% of Irish GPs attend at least annually. Over the years, boundaries have been broken with local GPs now working together to better patient care. It is felt that small group CME has been a big contributor to this sense of camaraderie and trust amongst local colleagues. Small group sessions allow members to discuss difficult cases, practice issues, staff issues etc. Thus it is a very important forum for each attending GP.

A tutor is visited once during their five-year tenure. The purpose of this is to evaluate the individual scheme and audit the quality and standards of the overall educational programme provided by CME tutors. This is a valuable learning experience for all of those that attend and it looks at the whole organisation and the member's attendance. It looks at the methods used along with the content and also looks at the tutor's personal development. At the end of each visit recommendations are made regarding the scheme to the various bodies in college.

The other important part of a tutor's job is attending tutor

...I have been a CME tutor for the past 15 years and yes I still enjoy the job!



Claire McNicholas – Strong bonds have been created among the tutors

workshops three times a year. Over 95% of tutors attend each of these workshops. These are residential sessions, usually all day Friday and up to Saturday lunchtime. The January meeting is held in Dublin – the other two out of Dublin. There is usually a visiting speaker, eg. the professors of general practice from all the Irish universities, some of the project directors in the ICGP and at times there have been foreign presenters from the UK, Denmark and Sweden. The days are divided into plenary sessions, parallel sessions and sometimes a plenary fishbowl. Tutors are asked to prepare bids in advance and usually nine bids are presented over the working week-end in three parallel sessions. A bid is something that a tutor has worked up in advance to present to his or her colleagues. Ideally it is a common and important area with the most up-to-date evidence presented. At the workshop, the tutor gets the chance to deliver the material, usually in less time than will be available back in his own faculty. However, the session allows the group to get a sense of the content and the method of delivery of this educational package. Materials are then fine-tuned by the presenting tutor after feedback from colleagues. The topic is then made available through the ICGP website to the tutor group. This allows any of the other tutors who want to present this topic to their own small groups access this material. The workshop also allows educational issues to be presented. Also hot topics that need to be brought to the larger tutor-group can also be presented, eg. the recent swine flu outbreak. There are also regional meetings held where tutors in neighbouring counties can meet to discuss local issues.

There is great camaraderie in the tutor group and the social aspect of the weekend is also very important. Over the years there have been tennis matches, football games and laterally long walks. Sometimes there is a lively singing session. Strong bonds have been created amongst the tutors and tutors can keep in touch regularly through the discussion board on the ICGP website.

Many tutors are into their second and third term of five years and other tutors just choose to do one five-year cycle. (It is hard to believe that I have been a CME tutor for the past 15 years and yes I still enjoy the job!)