

HEALTH CARE FOR ALL: ADDRESSING THE NURSING CRISIS THROUGH SELF-HELP LEARNING

Professor David Woods, University of Cape Town and the Perinatal Education Trust

pepcourse@mweb.co.za

The provision of quality health care for all in South Africa faces many challenges and it is unlikely that the three Millennium Development Goals addressing maternal and childhood health and controlling the spread of HIV will be met by 2015. One of the critical weaknesses in our dysfunctional public health service is a lack of nurses with the required knowledge, skills and attitudes to prevent, diagnose and manage common disorders. Currently there are over 45000 vacancies for nurses in the public sector alone.

The traditional method of centralised teaching in both the basic and on-going training of health workers is no longer affordable, practical or achievable. Neither the facilities nor the training personnel are available to tackle this awesome task. In contrast, on-site facilitated learning based on individual study and group discussion using local mentors and regional facilitators rather than formal teachers is highly effective, cheap and self-empowering. What is learned is immediately applied in clinical practice. This method of self-help learning is particularly suited to the continuing education of health professionals who have already received their basic training. The emphasis is on learning and understanding which produces confident practitioners rather than teaching and rote learning which fosters dependency and insecurity.

The Perinatal Education Programme, based on the principles of self-help, and presented as a series of self-directed course books, has enabled nurses, doctors and undergraduate students to take partial responsibility for their own continuing education and professional growth. In addition a free web-based option is widely accessed by health workers in other countries.

The maternal care and newborn care course books from the Perinatal Education Programme each provide for a one year course and have been extensively evaluated in a number of studies in both urban and rural sites including two prospective trials in the Eastern Cape (1). The latter demonstrated a significant improvement in cognitive knowledge, clinical skills, attitudes and the standard of patient care when groups of nurses took responsibility for their own in-service education without formal teachers. Very few distance learning projects have documented such changes in clinical practice.

A number of books for shorter courses cover topics such as saving mothers and babies, mother and baby friendly care, care during labour, clinic-based care for

mothers and infants, perinatal HIV and birth defects. Other course books address adult HIV, childhood HIV, childhood TB and care of well women.

The books use a simple and very effective question-and-answer format to enable the participants to learn in a logical step-wise manner. These pieces of information, which cover the definition, description, prevention, diagnosis and management of common and important clinical conditions, are then pulled together in clinical scenarios and presented as case studies followed by further questions and answers. Each book is divided into modules which address specific topics (2).

Participants are also encouraged to learn clinical skills through a series of skills workshops. Each provides a list of the equipment needed together with simple line drawings and a clear description of each step of the process. Participants study and practice the skills together, preferably with a colleague experienced in that skill.

During the past 20 years 70000 healthcare workers in both public and private sectors have used these course books in South Africa. They also manage their own in-course knowledge assessments and final examination. The required standard in the final examination is 80%. Over 10000 nurses have successfully completed courses. A system of retrospective bursaries refunds participants the cost of their course books. In this way success is rewarded and the pride and sense of achievement is a powerful motivator for colleagues also to establish their own study groups.

Recently a successful project has been launched whereby thousands of nurses receive a SMS text message on their cell phones each week bringing essential lessons in maternal and newborn care (3). The use of tablets, with or without internet connection, holds the promise of expanding these and other similar distance learning courses. Facebook and Mxitare also being used to distribute essential health care messages.

The training material can be used by independent groups or by formal training organisation to expand or enrich their own courses. As widespread consultation and contributions were used in preparing the learning materials, the course books present a consensus document for South Africa. Both national and World Health Organisation protocols have been considered. The flexible nature of the book layout allows for rapid updating or additions. Much of the past fragmentation in the training of nurses and doctors can be remedied if common learning materials are used.

Soon every health care professional in South Africa could have access to self-directed learning which will improve patient care without the restraints of the present methods of trainer dependent education. This system of effective and cost-efficient enhanced learning promises to make a major contribution to the rescue and restructuring of health care provision in South Africa.

1. www.pepcourse.co.za
2. www.EBWhealthcare.com
3. Woods D, Attwell, A, Ross K, Theron G. Text messages as a learning tool for midwives. *S Afr Med J* 2012; 102: 100-101.