Evidence-based information for patients: Teaching health care professionals to find, adapt and develop it

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Background.
− Most patients want more information and greater share in decision-making.
− Evidence-based information is a prerequisite for informed choice.
− Health care professionals are not always aware of patient information needs and tend to overestimate the amount of information they provide.
− A variety of patient information initiatives and resources exist online and offline on national and international levels.
− Recent research provides solid evidence on what constitutes evidence-based patient information, what type of content can be provided to health care professionals as internet-based learning, and what makes internet-based learning successful.

Method. Health care professionals need skills to:
− determine information needs of their patients;
− identify evidence-based information sources;
− provide information to patients using appropriate language, format and media.

To achieve these goals, a 4-week distance training course was developed and provided by the American International Health Alliance to partnering institutions in Eurasia and Africa. Between 2009 and 2013 the course was offered 5 times: to specialists in infectious diseases (Russia); nurses and clinical pharmacists (Zambia, Ethiopia, Croatia); and nursing school faculty and nurses (Botswana, Zambia).

Course content. Patient information needs; internet-based resources and initiatives; hospital information policy; planning information package; patient information quality; collecting patients' views; presenting evidence to patients; writing style and media; dissemination and evaluation of patient information materials.

Assessment. Pre- and post-course self-evaluation requiring participants to evaluate their confidence in applying evidence-based practice (EBP) principles when providing information to patients; online quizzes; learning portfolio; course evaluation questionnaire.

Results. Health care professionals felt the gap in their knowledge and skills in all aspects of providing information to patients. They were eager to learn those skills and considered distance training very practical. Most changes in confidence after training were for (1) defining effective media and delivery method for providing information to selected audience, (2) preparing a search strategy, and (3) critical appraisal of patient information materials.

Conclusions. Distance training showed to be a practical method in helping health care professionals to acquire knowledge and skills in (1) identifying the best sources of evidence, (2) searching the Internet effectively for evidence-based resources, (3) critically appraising available patient information, and (4) identifying methods for developing and introducing patient information materials in their own practice. The content and learning activities can be easily adapted to different audiences.