

WOLFGANG RUTIL

Austria's experiences with accredited Continuing Medical Education

Accredited continuing medical education in Austria is based on the principles of voluntary participation, individual motivation, transparency, quality-assurance and documentation. This system, called "Diplomfortbildungsprogramm (DFP)" and introduced by the Austrian Medical Chamber in January 1995, has been highly recognised by doctors, providers, as well as at international levels.

In Austria, the CME programme of the Austrian Medical Chamber presents impressive facts and figures: more than 4000 doctors hold a diploma under this official CME programme. Since January 2000, there have been 100.000 inquiries with the CME database containing all accredited CME events which are entered. Since January 1999, 13.000 certified events have been entered in this database. In Austria, there are 1800 CME providers which have offered events and programmes certified under the official CME programme over the past 7 years.

In 1995, the Austrian Medical Chamber adopted the CME ("DFP") programme which is uniform at national level. All provinces agreed that CME in Austria should have a voluntary character and should help doctors find "high-quality and certified" CME in suggesting at the same time how many hours he is supposed to spend in continuous up-dating of his knowledge. The requirement of 120 CME points acquired over a period of 3 years makes doctors eligible for an official CME diploma. One CME point is equivalent to 45 CME minutes. This amount is highly accepted by doctors.

CME events certified under the CME programme have to meet quality criteria. This quality assurance helps doctors and patients identify certified CME events, which means that the following conditions are fulfilled:

- CME based on medical science and experience and oriented towards the benefit and well-being of the patient
- CME free of economic interests and objective
- CME taking into consideration recognised and common rules of medical teaching

Providers are under the obligation prove that their events comply with these criteria (“approval under the CME programme“). For this purpose, there is one representative for each specialty who has been suggested by the Scientific Society. It is his duty to safeguard the compliance with the standards and to grant or reject certification.

The internet database for CME, which doctors enter free of charge, informs about all certified CME events, respectively how many CME hours are required for the award of a diploma in a given specialty. In addition, the database provides information about the objectives, target groups, contents, registration modes and fees.

This system has brought about a clear shift in the attitude towards quality in the field of CME.

Since 2001 CME points can be obtained online. Medical articles on the website of the “Akademie der Ärzte“ (Austrian Academy of Physicians) contain questions which are eligible for credit towards the CME diploma, if answered correctly by the doctor. An e-mail addressed to the doctor confirms the number of points obtained.

Online CME is planned to be extended in the future, the first pilot projects in form of interactive online courses, are being launched.

Since beginning of 2003, longstanding CME providers under the CME programme have the possibility of obtaining accreditation. This enables them to grant their events certification, provided that they comply with the criteria of the CME programme. Providers show much interest: until now, 80 renowned providers submitted applications for accreditation.

The strict requirement that 80% of the CME points used for a CME diploma have to relate to the field in which the individual doctor is specialised, was abolished in a trial phase and this pilot project is a success. In this way, every doctor has the chance to use CME points, even if obtained in familiar specialties for his own CME diploma.