The significance of bonding/networking as a professional

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Abstract The importance of ongoing professional development is increasing in significance as radiation therapists strive for greater recognition as professionals. Networking is one aspect to consider in this process, with scientific meetings becoming important tools to encourage radiation therapists’ passion for their chosen profession. To embrace the changes taking place in health it is important to outline the significance of communication and education and the increasing need for commitment to continuing professional development (CPD). Radiation therapy depends on teamwork locally, nationally and internationally. Conferences, seminars and workshops can provide excellent avenues for bonding/networking with likeminded colleagues and allied health professionals and can contribute to a united approach in the treatment of cancer. Both the scientific program and social events of these meetings often bring together industry and clinical professionals providing a safe environment for the exchange of information, ideas and the potential to enhance problem-solving skills. The importance of encouraging attendance at conferences, seminars and workshops is one aspect of CPD where networking can instigate the forging of bonds, friendships and collaborations that lead to changes in the profession.

Keywords: continuing professional development, radiation therapy

Introduction

The world is in a state of constant change. The biomedical model of health, which is based primarily on treating the disease of an individual, is making way for the emerging biopsychosocial model which emphasises that consideration of the health of the individual, including the psychosocial aspects, to be taken into account in delivery of treatment of the disease (Table 1). Although the paradigm of health is shifting to prevention and wellness, diseases such as cancer will still be prevalent due to the ageing population. Enhancement of services in oncology requires consideration of the whole person and not just the disease process. Radiation therapists play an integral role in caring for the patient and may be able to improve the overall care of the patient through ongoing professional development and contact with other radiation therapists who also care for the patient. The importance of continuing professional development (CPD) is increasing in medicine and health generally and is becoming more important in our field as radiation therapists strive for greater professional recognition.

The Australian Institute of Radiography defines CPD as:

‘Continuing professional development is the ongoing maintenance and growth of professional excellence through participation in lifelong learning activities, which are planned and implemented to achieve this for the benefit of participants, patients and the public.’ (p.4)

Although there has been debate over whether CPD should become mandatory, there has been little dispute about the positive aspects of professionals actively engaging in the search of increasing knowledge and education throughout their professional lives. Furthermore, the notion of ‘being professionals’ suggests ongoing professional development is required to ensure that radiation therapy continues to evolve and patients receive the highest standard of care that can be provided.

The future sees the likelihood of all Australian radiotherapy centres/ departments requiring accreditation to ensure best radiotherapy cancer care for all Australians and with changing technology it is imperative that radiation therapists endeavour to stay abreast of change to deliver best quality care. The use of evidence-based practice (EBP) in conjunction with updates and changes to equipment are paramount for the delivery of a high standard of health care. Supporting and encouraging further knowledge development as a health professional is an important aspect to consider.

As Wilson and Porter-O’Grady state: ‘real wisdom comes with the recognition that outcomes are achieved through collective enterprise, not through the efforts of any one person.’ (p.245)

Scientific meetings foster and encourage radiation therapists to reflect on their chosen profession and in turn enhance treatment delivery practices. Having the opportunity to voice opinions, discuss research papers, share ideas and strategies at conferences, seminars and workshops, networking can become a valuable byproduct producing collaboration and mutual respect.

Table 1 The biomedical model of health, which is based primarily on treating the disease of an individual, is making way for the emerging biopsychosocial model.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biomedical model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnosis and treatment of disease</td>
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<td>The physical processes</td>
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(Engel 1978; Borrell-Carrio, et al. 2004)
The determinants of health status in the 21st century (Fig. 1) summarises the many facets influencing health, health professionals and the societies we live in. It demonstrates how each area of existence is connected from the individual to the global and the resulting complexity if change occurs at any of these levels. Communication and education are key components in the sharing of information, ideas, research data and results throughout the world. As a consequence of this is the desired continuing of revision and updating of knowledge and skills for health care professionals.

The aims of this paper are to use the determinants of health status to:
- Demonstrate that bonding/networking is an integral part of CPD for radiation therapists; and
- Consider how a change in health models has influenced the health workforce, particularly the allied health care worker and as a result, the ensuing necessity for CPD.

Health models and professionalism

The role of the radiation therapist has evolved over many years. Changes have taken place in technology and as a result subsequent changes in education. The original role of radiotherapy technician has evolved to the present day as a radiation therapist professional having completed a university degree. According to one author, allied health workers were traditionally in subservient roles to the university educated medical specialists. Looking at the changing trends in health models may give insight into how this change in role has come about with the difference in health models highlighting the move toward wellness with emphasis on total health care and as a result the changes in education that have influenced the direction of the profession.

Borrelli-Carrio, Suchman and Epstein describe the shift from the biomedical health model to the biopsychosocial health model as:

>Philosophically, it is a way of understanding how suffering, disease, and illness are affected by multiple levels of organisation, from the societal to the molecular. At the practical level, it is a way of understanding the patient’s subjective experience as an essential contributor to accurate diagnosis, health outcomes, and human care.' (p.576).

While this shift has been occurring, there has also been an increase in the need for greater specialisation in the allied health area. These changes taking place in health have influenced the way health professionals view a variety of concepts and processes. This is reflected from the undergraduate level to those senior professionals undertaking study in many associated areas of research both technical and psychosocial to stay abreast of the changing nature of health this century. For example, in radiation therapy, this has included embracing such areas as brachytherapy, breast mark-up and stereotactics radiation therapy.

In turn, the number of university degrees and courses required for delivery of more specialised services has increased and according to one author has seen the rise of new professionals striving for a level of autonomy not previously recognised. As
discussed by Refshauge and Higgs: ‘health professionals today need to be capable of performing competently in an autonomous, professional capacity, of maintaining this competence, and of generating knowledge throughout their careers.’ (p.143)

In 1986 in Ottawa, Canada, an international conference on health promotion was held, presenting ‘The Ottawa Charter’ as a plan of action aimed at improving health for everyone by the year 2000 and beyond. Recognising that health includes well-being, the charter described the necessary basics for health and highlighted the need for a sound basis on which to build improvements in health. This charter embraces the biopsychosocial model, supporting the belief that this model of health also encourages health professionals toward a healthier attitude and greater satisfaction to work and life. It was the first such international meeting and has also contributed to the way health is now regarded globally.

Communication and education play a central part in all health care professions. This could be achievable by medical radiation professionals actively engaging in these areas with colleagues and other health professionals in parallel with individual learning pursuits. Furthermore, to achieve a well-rounded outlook professionally, it could be argued that it would require embracing the biopsychosocial as this looks at all aspects of human health. The author who introduced the biopsychosocial model also suggested that basic skills for health clinicians should be derived from understanding that all three aspects of biological, psychological and social must be considered in each health undertaking.

As stated in the Baume report, the role of a radiation therapist takes on the two contrasting tasks of ‘technical expertise’ and ‘supportive care’ for individuals facing a life-threatening disease indicating again a change toward the biopsychosocial model of health where consideration of the whole person is taken into account when treatment is being prescribed.

Individual, local, global

Radiation therapy, as any other health profession depends on teamwork locally, nationally and internationally. As previously discussed, looking at the determinants of the key health status issues of communities/populations at the beginning of the 21st century (Fig. 1) gives insight into how intrinsically health is linked with all levels of existence from the individual to the global, highlighting the impact and importance of change on any level.

By taking a closer look, it can be seen that the health status of human populations throughout the world is determined by a complex interconnected number of factors. Physical aspects of where an individual lives, where they work and biological inheritance influence each human’s health and well-being. Culture, family traditions and social networks, interwoven with the spirituality of each person, including beliefs and coping mechanisms, further add to the complexity. Education and literacy along with gender issues and behavioural practices and beliefs complete the intricate profile of every individual. However, global populations are made up of communities so the community in which they reside further influences the individual’s health status.

Each community is subjected to the following types of determinants: location, culture, tradition, government, resources, trade, infrastructure, social structure, workforce conditions/skills mix and population mix (e.g. urban/rural/indigenous).

Both the individual and community are also affected by technology, communication, research and development, trade/world markets, migration, disease management, governments and other organisations such as WHO (World Health Organization).

So it is no surprise radiation therapy is also affected by constant change. It is not only influenced by newer, better equipment but also by advances in information technology and the impact of this within the health industry and the community. Radiotherapy centres worldwide will begin to embrace these changes as the population becomes more knowledgeable with increased expectations about treatment for cancer. Many factors including global markets, financial viability, academic requirements, accreditation and licensing and the attrition rate of radiation therapists create workforce issues worldwide and increase the effect of change even further. Other complicating factors include advances in screening and early disease detection increasing the number of potential clients.

Continual development of professional knowledge

Gaining a bachelor degree in medical radiation is only the beginning of life as a radiation therapist. By taking a closer look at the changing health models and the key determinants of health status in the 21st century a better understanding can be achieved of why education and in particular CPD is a necessary component of being a professional. The ever-changing face of technology, scientific discovery and the world in which we live influences both health and the professionals providing services to the population. Continual adaptation by updating and assessing skills and knowledge are necessary for each health care professional for maintaining an acceptable standard of approach to service provision.

A number of articles have been published that stress the importance of evidence-based practice (EBP), but with the increasing speed of information delivery using the internet it seems it would be necessary to carefully scrutinise any data obtained. No longer is there a long delay between research results being available because both the data and results are often readily available electronically. Networking with likeminded professionals can foster valuable discussions and debate about EBP that can be undertaken at workshops and seminars enabling shared outcomes. Many other professionals and industries connected to the field of medical radiation also have the opportunity of exposing new ideas, new equipment and its application to practice. To do this they rely heavily on feedback from the attendees and potential users indicating that perhaps networking can be a valuable by-product.

Conferences, seminars and workshops can also provide excellent avenues for networking with likeminded colleagues and allied professionals to provide a basis for a united approach in the treatment of cancer. Both the scientific program and social events often bring together industry and clinical professionals, providing a safe environment for the exchange of information, ideas and the potential to enhance problem-solving skills.

There are a growing number of workshops and conferences attempting to address communication issues between medical radiation professionals, industry and other associated professionals. Gatherings such as these provide professionals exposure to new ideas and to test new devices, to give constructive feedback and criticism.

Inter-professional education may also be considered as different specialists begin to overlap in the quest to improve oncology services. Roberts stated: ‘collaboration, particularly
inter-professional collaboration, offers healing professionals an avenue for improving healthcare for all members of our society.’ (p7)

It would seem appropriate that some attendance at scientific meetings or seminars that cross the barriers between the differing allied health specialties could be beneficial in working towards a united approach to a high level of treatment delivery and patient care. This could further develop networking and enhance the importance of communication and education in professional development.

For radiation therapists practicing CPD it can be advantageous to create a portfolio to maintain a current record of activities. A variety of ways of obtaining knowledge from conference attendance to an informal discussion with a colleague in the workplace or fellow conference attendee could enhance the professional development experience.

There are other considerations in the pursuit of knowledge including ethical issues, CPD registration and ‘real’ learning not just to satisfy the number of points required within a certain timeframe.

Developing professionally also embraces learning strategies that can become life-long. Working as part of a team, undertaking research, application of research, knowledge construction, organisation and learning theories can all be grouped under the CPD umbrella.

It is understandable that communication and education are two important areas that influence CPD. Methods of communication are rapidly changing with research findings and results more readily available than ever before. This indicates information and the delivery of data relevant to current and future practices should be proved, accepted, processed and understood before put into practice.

As discussed, CPD can be practiced on many levels with added benefits from those activities that involve communicating with other health professionals. A natural progression from attending meetings is the informal gatherings that perpetuate friendships and acquaintances that may develop closer ties. Networking can foster trust and confidence and can result in further exchange of ideas and practices on a more relaxed level.

This is well summarised by Roberts: ‘Professional collaboration is the key to repair a fragmented healthcare system, promote greater access for patients, create better interventions, and improve outcomes’. (p.12)

Other benefits of seminar and conference attendance can be the desire to become a presenter to share a technique or to discuss and debate an important issue. Presentations can embrace technical changes and/or patient care issues such as information, communication and the importance of meeting accreditation standards with the use of shared problem solving. Presentations with a focus on original research that has been conducted provide higher degrees students/radiotherapy professionals to receive feedback on the research they have or are in the process of conducting.

Areas of expertise may also develop into specialties as the profession develops. These specialities will also require continual review and updating.

It would seem that a professional should be willing to stay flexible, alert and knowledgeable in current practices. Also as a professional the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills can assist in the ability to discuss and debate while embracing development and evidence based practice with confidence.

As professionals, we can encourage one another to attend scientific meetings, seminars and workshops to further our professional development, as networking is a powerful way to bring together likeminded professionals. The bonds formed are possibly the building blocks to a positive attitude and the future of the profession.

There will always be challenges to face and changes occurring and this must be taken into the radiation therapists’ stride as part of the very essence of radiotherapy.

Ross stated: ‘The radiation therapist is now, more than ever, looked on as a resource for the patient and must be knowledgeable enough to reinforce, debate, correct, and/or expand information that the patient has gained over the internet or from other sources.’ (p.196) Perhaps it is time for reassessing communication and its role in the continuing education of the health professional in establishing a collaborative approach to the cancer care being provided.

Drawing on the emerging biopsychosocial model of health in conjunction with the determinants of key health status issues, supports a growing importance of networking as an integral part in the continual development of professional knowledge for radiation therapists and other health professionals.

Conclusion
As professionals, there is a need to encourage each other to attend scientific meetings to further our professional development. Evidence of skills and knowledge enhancing daily practice will be necessary for employers and industry to continue to support attendance. Networking is a powerful way to bring together likeminded professionals to share knowledge and provide a high standard of care to health on all levels, individually, locally and globally.

There will always be changes taking place within the health profession as a result of ongoing research and development and as a consequence more emphasis placed on health professionals to continue developing professionally. One important aspect of being professional is developing a network with likeminded people to further enhance practices while striving to deliver the optimum in cancer care.

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