A School of Pharmacy Without Walls - Virtual? Reality??

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During the 1998 AACP Annual Meeting at Snowmass Village, Sir John Daniel from the Open University in the United Kingdom challenged the academy to consider the future, and the form and functionality of future educational offerings. One aspect of his presentation dealt with Internet mediated course delivery. Much has changed in the short period since his presentation. During 1999, data transfer via telecommunication conduits has now exceeded voice traffic. Furthermore, the amount of data transferred via phone lines now doubles in a six-month period of time. The rapid expansion of transmission capabilities and subsequent demand on pharmacy-related applications has impacted pharmacy education. The academy may not have approached the degree of sophistication or the degree of rapidity suggested by Sir John Daniel, however major strides have been taken to enter this new ethereal structure of teaching and learning. Many schools and colleges of pharmacy have entered this new world with courses, curricula, or perhaps degree completion options for professional and graduate programs. What has been implemented is significant, but no doubt a small representation of what is yet to come. There are many exciting possibilities that lie ahead. Some may be viewed as positive or negative depending upon the vantage point of the observer.

When will the first online, school of pharmacy “without walls” enter this brave new world? Would such a school formed in this manner be possible, and/or appropriate? It is certainly possible, but I cannot answer the appropriate question for anyone other than for myself. With the clamor to produce more and more pharmacists to meet the current and future person power crisis, and with the ease of access and application of the Internet to the learning environment, the eventual entry of this new type of pharmacy school is probably on the drawing board somewhere right now. The University of Phoenix (UP)(1) currently offers online options (as well as several other regional locations) for completion of Bachelor of Science (B.S.N.), Master of Science (M.S.N.), and Nurse Practitioner (N.P.) requirements through the UP Department of Health Care Professions. These programs are all designed to enable the adult learner with nursing credentials to upgrade to an advanced degree. Are complete pre-pharmacy, and professional pharmacy curricula amenable to a web delivery vehicle?

Many of us are privileged to be faculty members on beautiful campuses that provide exemplary residential opportunities for teaching and learning. A university without walls does not need a residential campus, and varying components of the infrastructure to operate. Farrington(2) has addressed the foibles, pitfalls, and opportunities provided via an education delivered in a non-residential environment. Even though describing the appealing aspects of internet based curricular delivery, Farrington suggests that the interaction occurring on residential campuses leads to a thriving scholarly and learning environment. Farrington further suggests: "A network of high-speed telecommunication lines can never replace that interaction."(3, p.94) An economic assessment of potential profits derived in a virtual school of pharmacy no doubt will be an enticement for profiteering to rise to the top of considerations in such programs.

This is an issue not only germane to pharmacy, but has engendered debate elsewhere. Perley and Tanguay (Perley is chair of the American Association of University Professors’ Committee on the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities, Tanguay is a member of the committee) have noted: "...total on-line institutions raise questions about the meaning and preservation of higher education itself." (4, p. B4) In a counterpoint response to the above salvo, Crow (executive director of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges) counters: “To be accredited, on-line institutions also must go through an extensive preliminary review that screens out the poorly conceived, the academically dubious, and the inadequately financed." (5, p. B5) Pharmacy voices need to be heard on this issue.

At this point, I am opposed to the formation, accreditation, institutional membership, and acceptance of virtual schools of pharmacy without walls. The requirements of pharmacy practice, in my mind, demand the interdependence of health professionals and the varying health professions. The delivery of courses via an Internet based medium can be accomplished with success for educator and learner for components of the education of a pharmacist. However, I do not feel that other non-interactive simulations can substitute for most of the patient care oriented clerkship experiences. Also, the communication needs, presentation skills, and empathic necessities required for delivery of pharmaceutical care can never be delivered via a non-interactive media to the best degree possible. Compounding skills resulting in skillful ointments, emulsions, or other preparations cannot be gained in a virtual environment. Something as simple as recognizing molecules forming a eutectic mass can be visualized, but not fully appreciated until you are able to perform the task by yourself. Other, much more sophisticated activities (e.g., DNA splitting) are occurring in our educational programs, and are much more difficult to carry out, analyze, and comprehend the outcomes of in a virtual environment. Other examples are abundant.

What of the faculty member in such environments? The development of research programs requires colleagues, interactions, and intellectual support and challenges. Collaboration across many barriers (intra-university, departmental, and geographic) is accomplished in varying degrees and with variable success in various disciplines; however, it would be most difficult to accomplish in a virtual environment. Through consulting agreements, faculty can provide course work development and delivery. The guidelines for ownership of the resulting intellectual property for Internet delivered courses are tightly controlled in both public and private institutional environments. Because of such ownership restrictions, an Internet delivered course by a faculty member at a home institution may not be able to be delivered through a consulting agreement with another school, or through virtual delivery means. It simply may not be possible to do so legally. If we have strong feelings (I just shared mine), we should make our voices heard when the issue of virtual schools “without walls” arises in a more substantive fashion than presented here. Without denigrating advanced degree opportunities for pharmacists with current degrees that are currently offered via Internet mediated delivery (such
as those available with non-traditional pathways for pharmacists with a B.S. degree to obtain a PharmD), I feel a dialogue regarding the issue of appropriate delivery of a complete curriculum for a pharmacy degree via non-traditional, and Internet mediated pathways needs to see the light of day, and be closely scrutinized. A zero-6 option, or a 2-4 option with at least the equivalent of four years of a curriculum offered via an Internet environment will not serve the needs of pharmacy students, faculty, and/or other health professionals. In my mind, patients would not be well served by pharmaceutical care delivered by graduates solely educated in this manner.

If we feel strongly about the benefits of residential education in general, and the specific needs of pharmacy students and the profession, we should not be timid in expressing these views. You certainly do not need to share my view on this, but a healthy dialogue is needed now. This proactivity needs to occur within our institutions; states; professional (all of them); trade; regulatory pharmacy organizations; ACPE; and the AACP. There is far too much to lose in not thoroughly analyzing this issue now and in the foreseeable future.

References
(1) http://www.uophx.edu