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Tomorrow's medical specialists: how to train top-notch doctors

What are the most effective models for training our doctors, and how can we ensure that members of the profession undertake lifelong learning? Taking place from 24-28 August, the Association for Medical Education Europe (AMEE) Conference aims to find answers to these questions. The event will focus on quality assurance and finding ways to improve medical training.

Medical degree programmes are still hugely popular. In 2019, 16,443 people applied for one of the 1,680 places on offer in Austria, an increase of 1,400 on the previous year. At the moment, the students selected for one of the coveted places have the opportunity to develop their practical medical skills at a very early stage in their degree. This will also be a focus for discussions at the AMEE Conference between 24 and 28 August.

A key objective: practical abilities

“In the past, a degree in medicine was mainly a matter of acquiring knowledge, but nowadays the emphasis is on doing as well as knowing. That means practical capabilities are becoming more and more important,” explains Prof. Richard März of the Medical University of Vienna (MedUni Vienna), and head of the local organising committee. Austria took a significant step forward in 2001 with its reform of the medical degree curriculum. This led to the introduction of a modular system comprising a written, integrated end-of-year exam, as well as a thesis, and a stronger clinical focus beginning in the first semester. Instead of an excessive dose of theory, there is a greater emphasis on practical skills. Subjects missing from the curriculum – such as human genetics and intensive care medicine – were added and students were given opportunities to enter continuing scientific training early on. Annual adaptations ensure that the six-year training programme remains constantly up to date.

A new international perspective: patients as teachers

“This approach has enabled us to show that we aren't treating diseases, we're treating people,” März notes. Students work with patients from the first semester onwards, whereas in the past the degree opened with a course on dissection. This emphasis is highly important, and it is also reflected in the 360° feedback system used in clinical assessments. These assessments are based on the views of the consultant, colleagues, nurses, clinical staff and the patient. “This means we can show that we're taking patients seriously,” März emphasises.

From on-the-job training to community-based medicine

Besides university hospitals, training hospitals are also involved in the education process in order to help students gain more hands-on experience. University hospitals specialise in dealing with complex cases, but at training hospitals students can learn more about routine treatments and procedures and develop the requisite skills,” says März of this effective supplementary training. An international trend that the AMEE Conference will discuss as a potential training model is community-based medicine. “We can still learn a lot from the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, which have all implemented training models incorporating teaching surgeries in addition to their hospital-based models,” März explains.

Effective research – the key to success

Research is a vital component of this success. “In the world of medicine, knowledge has a very short half-life, so it’s essential that future generations of physicians are not only consumers of research findings, but also perform research themselves,” März points out. All MedUni Vienna students are required to write a thesis, and many use this as an opportunity to take part in medical research projects. Designed to promote excellence in the medical field, the special MD-PhD programme enables high-potential students to kick off their doctorate while they are still working towards their medical degree.

Continuing education – significant steps towards lifelong learning

It is not just initial training but also continuing professional education that is important for physicians and all those working in the medical profession; indeed, all these groups have a moral and more and more also statutory obligation to regularly update their skills and knowledge. Besides advanced training conferences and training courses, digitalisation is giving rise to state-of-the-art learning models that are paving the way for part-time, asynchronous study.

About the AMEE Congress

The Association for Medical Education Europe (AMEE) is the world’s largest international organisation focused on enhancing medical training and development. Some 4,000 physicians other groups working in the medical profession such as lecturers, education experts, professors, academics and students from all over the world are expected to attend its annual conference in Vienna from 24-28 August. The conference will focus on quality assurance for existing training programmes as well as improving medical education in the future, and the agenda will include presentations of new training models.

About IAKW-AG

Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG) is responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC) and operating the Austria Center Vienna (ACV). The Austria Center Vienna is Austria's largest conference centre, with 24 halls, 180 meeting rooms, and some 22,000m² of exhibition space, and is one of the top players on the international conference circuit.

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