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August 17, 2006

Thinking, acting like a dentist from the first day of class, Case School of Dental Medicine rolls out new curriculum

Dental educators around the country are watching as Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine rolls out its new theme-based curriculum. First-year dental students will begin developing, from the first day of class through graduation four years later, the thinking skills and leadership abilities needed as private practice dentists.



Students will have classes organized around the four themes of health and well-being, disease processes, restoration of health and maintenance of health.

Tying the entire curriculum together will be the threads of inquiry and leadership—important components identified by the dental faculty as keys to success in caring for patients, managing a dental office and staff or doing research.

A key element in the program—and one that sets Case's school apart from other dental schools—will be up to four new experiences that bring students into real-life or simulated dental experiences. These activities will be in addition to its hallmark Healthy Smiles Sealant Program that reaches more than 5,000 Cleveland school children in the second and sixth grades and where first-year students have opportunities to use their dental skills in sealing young children's teeth.

Based on the sealant experiences, Case students have shown a heightened motivation to learn when they know they were going to practice it within a short period of time. A large portion of the curriculum will be taught around preparing students for these challenges.

"The faculty is committed to this new program that we believe is engaging, interactive and satisfying for all," said Jerold S. Goldberg, dean of the dental school.

In 2002, the school started reconstructing its curriculum after it received approval without recommendations—the highest accreditation status given in reviews by the American Dental Association's Commission of Dental Accreditation.

"We felt the time was right to create a culture of change and inquiry," said Marsha Pyle, associate dean for education who has directed the process.

Described by Pyle as a "hybrid," the new curriculum will be unique among dental schools. Case will be only one of a handful of schools in the country to steer away from the traditional "silo," discipline-based curriculum and joins such schools as Harvard University, Indiana University, University of Southern California, University of California at San Francisco and Marquette University that are also making curriculum changes to respond to a changing culture in dental schools.

"The faculty members want the new curriculum to reflect relevancy and experiential, active learning," said Pyle.

Because the new courses in the curriculum are faculty intensive with small group and team teaching, the school will still offer lectures and seminars. Over the next three years, more of the

curriculum will reflect the new theme-based education.

Fall semester, the incoming students will have three new courses that use the theme-based approach in classes on a global perspective of dental medicine followed by ones that integrate basic sciences with the clinical sciences.

First-year students will continue to have the opportunity to work with dental patients through the sealant program and practice sealing each other's teeth. They also will begin to work in the clinics with second-, third- and fourth-year students as part of their leadership development experience in learning how to work with a dental team.

The faculty helped design the new courses that are student self-directed, use pass-fail grades and are based on case studies that integrate a number of disciplines like anatomy, biochemistry, physiology and histology.

The curriculum changes respond to a vastly different world from the one when dentistry became a profession more than 70 years ago. Previously, the density of the curriculum created an atmosphere where students attended classes from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and then went home and studied, according to Pyle.

She said this provided little time for students to reflect on the importance of the principles and concepts they were expected to learn.

Therefore, Pyle added that the interconnections across principles were less likely to be fully developed.

Whereas the old curriculum focused on the memorization of factual information, the new approach capitalizes on the development of such essential skills as critical thinking that can be useful for life-long learning.

To lighten the load and provide adequate time for students to learn key concepts and reflect on their learning, each student will have three half-days each week of independent, self-directed study to build on the inquiry component of understanding how to research for sound scientific evidence and knowledge.

"The life span of new knowledge rapidly turns around. We want our students to understand that what they learn in school may become obsolete, and we must prepare them to have the mindset of constantly keeping up with changes," said Pyle.

Much of that new information continues to build on medical research that strongly links good oral health to overall health and is supported by this integrated approach to learning.

The self-directed components in the new curriculum also recognize that dental students need to learn and think as individuals when they begin practicing in isolated offices and must solve problem by themselves.

To support this new educational format, each incoming student will receive a tablet computer on which they can download a DVD that the school will provide and that contains all their electronic textbooks for the entire four years at Case and can be used to take notes, communicate with others and connect to the internet searching scientific literature.

Pyle said in order for this to work, students needed access to information.

"Our goal with this new curriculum is to make this education relevant, active and experiential for our students," said Pyle. "This is part of a goal of creating 'a culture of inquiry' at the school."

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Posted by: Heidi Cool, August 17, 2006 01:22 PM | News Topics: [HeadlinesMain](#), [Provost Initiatives](#)

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