

Use of Massive Online Open Courses as a Potential Resource to Provide Continuing Medical Education in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PM&DC) has made Continuing Medical Education (CME) mandatory for doctors, from 2015 onwards. A minimum of 15 credit hours of CME per year for general practitioners and 30 credit hours for specialist doctors have been made mandatory for renewal of the PMDC registration. While doctors can attend conferences to earn this CME credit, the opportunities are minimum and limited to major cities across Pakistan. Web-based CME is an attractive alternative to attending conferences. It can make up for 25% of the yearly PMDC requirement. So far, only two web-based CME providers have been launched in Pakistan, which is a shortage. Could Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) be used to fill this shortage? The MOOCs are online courses that are easily accessible to all learners irrespective of geographical boundary and resources, and can be used as a tool to provide CME to physicians. The problem as to how credit from PM&DC can be obtained, will need to be explored further.

Key Words: *Continuing medical education (CME). Massive online open courses (MOOCs). Online education. eLearning. Pakistan medical and dental council (PM&DC).*

The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PM&DC) has made the Continuing Medical Education (CME) mandatory for physicians. Those physicians who want to renew their PM&DC registration must agree to submit yearly CME to PMDC.¹ Universities and medical institutions in Pakistan which are capable of organizing educational conferences and workshops, can register themselves with PM&DC as accredited CME providers. A list of these providers is available on the PM&DC website, but to date the list is short.² There is currently a shortage of accredited online CME providers in Pakistan, which creates a potential market for Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are free online courses that are open to registration without any restrictions of geography. Anyone with computer literacy and an internet access can register for MOOCs. It is a phenomenon that started in North America but is now global and expected to grow further.³ The use of MOOCs as a platform for providing online CME in Pakistan needs to be explored further.

What are the CME guidelines for physicians in Pakistan? According to the PM&DC, every physician will have to submit the yearly CME. A general practitioner will be required to submit 15 credit hours (clock hours) while a specialist physician will be required to submit 30 credit hours (clock hours) of yearly CME

before their certification is renewed.¹ A list of the accredited institutions for providing CME has also been released by PM&DC.² Physicians can attend activities like conferences and workshops that will earn a certificate issued by one of these institutions, and this certificate can be presented to the PM&DC. In addition to conferences, 25% of the online CME will also be acceptable by the PM&DC.²

Who are the online CME providers in Pakistan?

There are only two PM&DC accredited institutes that provide online CME. The College of Family Medicine Pakistan (CFMP) claims to be the first portal providing online CME in Pakistan, for family practitioners.⁴ The lectures are available in an audio format along with supporting pictures.⁴ These are available to family practitioners who are registered members of College of Family Physicians, Pakistan.⁴ It is a great tool for family practitioners in Pakistan; however, its use is not open to non-members. The eligibility for membership as General Practitioner (GP) requires a minimum of two years of graduate training or five years of practice as a general practitioner.⁴

The Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi has also launched its DUHS e-CME program, which is a web-based CME program.⁵ They are currently offering eight modules on pediatric diseases and 6 modules on cardiac diseases. This course requires a PM&DC registration number in order to use the portal.⁵ It is a good initiative but is restricted to its target audience, only to family physicians.

There are more than 145,000 medical and dental practitioners registered with the PM&DC.⁶ With the new PM&DC rules, these doctors will need to fulfill the CME requirements. Not all of them would have the means to

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be physically present and attend a conference or workshop. Female physicians, who have restricted mobility due to family obligations, might be interested in online CME. The current online CME providers do not cater to the needs of the vast majority of doctors in Pakistan. Until a structured system of CME delivery is created and launched in Pakistan, Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) can be used to fill the gap.

What are MOOCs? Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are online courses that are open to registrations free of charge. These courses have start and end dates; but even after the start date, registration is often kept open unlike online courses that close registration at the start of the course. The MOOCs carry great potential to reach large number of learners from across the world as they can be accessed by anyone, anywhere in the world as long as they have internet access, computer literacy, and language proficiency. The MOOCs use a variety of learning materials including videos, documents, and quizzes.³ Top notch universities, like John Hopkins University, offer MOOCs through EdX. Although this revolution began in North America, it has now spread to institutions in many parts of the world.

How can MOOCs be used for online CME in Pakistan? The MOOCs are recently established, and there is a debate on whether they can be used to provide CME to doctors. There are scores of MOOCs that are free, universally available and relevant for CME in some specialties.⁷

The MOOCs are an attractive alternative to traditional learning methods, particularly for physicians who want to earn CME but are busy in travelings. Average MOOCs are eight weeks long and require around four hours of weekly self-study.³ The younger physician who is also computer literate will probably be interested in this platform as an educational resource. The question can be posed as to how MOOCs can be used to get credit in Pakistan? The answer depends upon whether the PM&DC will be open to accept CME from online portals outside Pakistan. According to the PM&DC, the CME from a foreign country will only be accepted if it is issued by approved institution/accredited council of the respective country.¹ It needs to be explored as to how many MOOCs are certified by accredited bodies like the American College of Continuing Medical Education (ACCME).⁸ These MOOCs can be reviewed by a panel of educationalists for the quality of education it provide. It can then be tagged on the PM&DC website for the convenience of those interested in participation. Once a participant completes the MOOCs and generates a certificate, it can be presented to the PM&DC for credit.

The number of credit hours, an 8-week online course can generate, will have to be determined as well. It will not be unfair to give more than 25% weight to online CME so as not to discourage the busy physician who has the motivation to learn. One of the ethical issues while taking a MOOC could be related to cheating. However, the primary value one gets from a MOOC is the self-improvement that comes from independent learning, and hence cheating is inappropriate.⁹

The PM&DC has made Continuing Medical Education (CME) mandatory for both generalist and specialist physicians. There is expected to be a growing need for CME for doctors. The MOOCs are a potential CME resource to explore and tap into, while alternative solutions are sought. The ACCME has approved some MOOCs for Continuing Medical Education.⁸ The MOOCs are relatively a recent phenomenon and resources on use of MOOCs for CME, at a postgraduate level for physicians, are limited. There is a possibility that this might change in the future, especially because of the increasing demand for CME 'for credit'. Research needs to be done on how MOOCs can be used for postgraduate CME for doctors in Pakistan.

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