

Virtual lessons

MIKE LEESON EXPLAINS HOW E-LEARNING CAN HELP HEALTH PROFESSIONALS KEEP ABREAST OF THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Time and money: few of us have enough of either and, as health service professionals struggle with increased work pressures and the NHS faces record levels of debt, it can be easy to dismiss non-essential training on grounds of the high cost and time-intensity of classroom-based learning programmes.

One reason e-learning is used increasingly within both the private and public health sectors is because it allows health service staff to pursue personal and professional development programmes without compromising routine clinical care.

In providing a viable alternative to traditional training at far lower cost and with significantly less time investment, e-learning is actually saving health services time and money. Most importantly, e-learning is introducing medics to new, life-saving medical procedures they would not otherwise have the time to learn, let alone put into practice.

SUCCESS IN PRACTICE

In one recent project in the Trent hospitals area, e-learning was used to train medics in intra-operative cell salvage (ICS). ICS is an autologous alternative to donor blood transfusions and, while the hospitals had ICS equipment, few staff knew how to use it because conventional ICS training demanded a considerable time commitment that threatened theatre schedules and waiting lists.

Yet, ICS offers considerable advantages over allogeneic blood transfusion, with less risk of infection – no need to collect, screen, store or transfuse blood – and associated cost savings. So Trent hospitals committed to increasing its use.

E-learning was recognised as a potential solution to the training problem and a pilot project was initiated under the auspices of a specially convened committee, called TACTICS (Training, Assessment and Competency in Trent Intra-operative Cell Salvage).

TACTICS designed an e-learning course supplying the essential clinical and theoretical background medics needed in advance of practical, hands-on training with ICS machines. A learning management system was included as part of the learning solution to manage the administration side of training and evaluate usage and results. Significantly, the e-learning delivery platform was a 'hosted' or online

E-LEARNING IS ACTUALLY SAVING HEALTH SERVICES TIME AND MONEY

solution, meaning it could be accessed anywhere, at any time, by any authorised learner who had access to the Internet. This enabled learners to develop at their own pace, rather than having to take out blocks of time to sit in a classroom.

The course was an outstanding success. Conventional training time was slashed from eight hours to an average of 90 minutes. Delivery costs were a fraction of traditional training costs. In one hospital alone during the three-month pilot period, 450 donor blood units were saved, a basic cost saving alone of £20,000. Some 150 medics in hospitals in the Trent region are now fully trained and certified to use ICS in the operating theatre;

hundreds more are progressing through training. The project won a prestigious National Training Award and the National Blood Service, having recognised the potential of the project, is about to roll it out nationwide.

VISIBLE BENEFITS

Elsewhere, e-learning powers health professionals' IT skills base. Currently, 180,000 users are registered on the NHS Connecting for Health ECDL e-learning programme and have reaped considerable benefits as a result; nurses, for instance, have saved an average of 30 minutes per day since training. It is no wonder that this project too has won many awards and is ranked as one of the largest and most effective IT training initiatives anywhere in Europe.

On a smaller yet no less significant scale, Nuffield Hospitals have rolled out an e-learning programme to train their entire workforce in more than 40 hospitals to use new, customised versions of Windows and Microsoft Office.

The benefits of e-learning are unmistakable and include reduced costs, time savings and flexible learning in a wide variety of skills from induction training to IT. There are also clear benefits for clinical care, health and safety, equal opportunities and diversity and management and leadership. Training is user-friendly, interactive and the learning delivery platform linked easily to HR systems for ease in managing, tracking and reporting on training initiatives.

It's not brain surgery – e-learning is simply a very powerful tool health services should use to their full advantage. n

Mike Leeson is the managing director of Course-Source. Call him on 0207 689 9700 to request a free Guide to E-Learning. For further information visit: www.course-source.net