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# PALLIATIVE CARE AND MEDICAL COMMUNICATION

Methodological  
and case study  
article

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## Abstract

*This article outlines learners' difficulty in acquiring and practicing palliative medical skills necessary in medical procedures due to limited technologically state-of-the art language learning support to facilitate optimum access for medical students to the European medicine sector and offers as a potential solution the Palliative Care MOOC project (2014-1-RO01-KA203-002940). The project is co-financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ program and coordinated by the Gr.T.Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Romania. The article describes the project idea and main objectives, highlighting its focus and activities on developing innovative guidelines on standardized fundamental medical procedures, as well as clinical language and communication skills. The project thus helps not only medical lecturers and language teachers who teach medical students, but also the medical students themselves and the lay people involved in causalities.*

## Introduction

The project aims to harmonise the curricula transversally, helping students in preclinical years to develop applied skills that will be further supported academically by knowledge gained through academic progress in the coming clinical years. Academic, scientific, and professional skills are acquired in an interdisciplinary manner with support offered concertedly by the palliative medical subjects and the languages and communication subjects.

The project specific objectives focus on:

- Promoting stronger coherence between different EU and national transparency and recognition tools and ensuring that skills are recognised across borders by identifying, defining and standardizing the palliative medical and nursing skills, which allow students across Europe to be active participants in clinical routine after their first year of medical studies.
- Improving the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market (everyday medical practice), through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work.
- Improving the teaching/ learning of languages and promoting the European Union's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness.
- Developing innovative and multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning and eLearning materials which support students both during their skills training and their practical module.
- Fostering quality improvements, innovation excellence and internationalisation at the level of education and training institutions, in particular through enhanced transnational cooperation between education and training providers and other stakeholders.
- Facilitating the exchange, flow and co-creation of knowledge.

The operational objectives are:

- Opening-up medical education for specialist training and non-specialist audiences through a MOOC addressing palliative care and the medical communication in this field in 6 languages.
- Encouraging mobility in Higher education: through the MOOC, local

students, international students, and Erasmus students are exposed to the same kind of training in palliative care, in a language of their choice. Standardization in higher education needs more than the transferable credit system to really become operational in real life. The project is a step in that direction.

- Contributing to the development of palliative care EU standards validated in the hospital. This is a major concern for the EU specialists in this field and it is part of the EU policies in the field of palliative care medicine.
- Encouraging the partnership between institutions creating new knowledge (HE), the validation of this new knowledge in the world of work (hospitals), and the 'export' of part of this new knowledge and skills towards the community through non-formal education.
- Strengthening the professional profile of teachers, medical lecturers, through their practice of transversal skills for all participants and through their acquisition and practice of digitally enriched educational tools.
- Developing high quality and accessible care services for old people: volunteers add up to the increase of the specialised human resources capability (students, nurses, doctors specialised in palliative care) which address the quality of the services related to old people, chronically ill people, all people with disabilities and special needs because of terminal diseases.
- Strengthening the professional profile of the teachers: MOOC techniques, video management for educational purposes, lecture making in digital format, synchronous and asynchronous teaching skills, acquisition of the principles and technical solutions to work within the new pedagogies that are student-centred and support the empowerment of the student to share and participate. Evaluation skills, team work and peer assessment are part of the skills developed by all the teachers and medical lecturers involved in the project.

Target group: the MOOC meets the learning needs of a wide variety of people:

- enrolled host country medical students studying in L1
- international students studying either in the host country language as a foreign language for them or in one of the widely used languages used for academic

purposes in the HE partner organisations (e.g.: English, French)

- international students interested in coming as mobility/exchange students or as fulltime students in these HE universities or similar ones from the partner countries
- Lecturers in palliative medicine or related medical areas
- Lecturers in multiculturalism, languages, CLIL, CALL
- Trainers in CLIL, CALL, Mobile learning
- Volunteers

### Project Context

All medical universities are engaged in the process of continual renewal of their curricula and methods and the educational institutions promote the use of computerized simulation in education to prepare learners for the world of work. Therefore their collaboration in this respect aims to find effective and cost reasonable solutions in order to meet the standards of the European Union and the demands set by the increased mobility.

The main aspects of the project that benefit from the European cooperation are:

- the creation of open digital educational resources in the field of medicine based on developing innovative guidelines on standardized fundamental palliative medical procedures and basic clinical language and communication skills, available throughout Europe; this is done through joint efforts by selecting, comparing and standardising the most common and important existing clinical procedures across Europe (<http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/582054> ). The consortium are working together closely sharing ideas and best practices across sectors (medicine, languages, educational), countries (RO, IT, ES, BE) and target groups (lecturers in medicine, doctors, students, nurses, language teachers, patients and their families, etc.). As the consortium involves adult education providers, universities, businesses, all of whom are represented by experts in their field, the benefits in terms of sharing of experience and ideas are very high value, and will contribute to realising the European vision.
- cooperation to find solutions to common challenges: connect theory, research and the world of work in the medical context under pressure of mobility and globalization; harmonize the curricula transversally, supporting students in pre-clinical years to develop applied skills that

are supported academically by knowledge gained though academic progress later on in the coming clinical years by jointly developing solutions for the issue (project MOOC).

- selection and creation of transnational standardised palliative procedures used everywhere in Europe, which give equal chances to doctors to practice medicine all over Europe.
- expanding the area of social responsibility of the medical HE institutions by offering the chance of a joint effort (MOOC) to support volunteering organisations and other bodies interested in contributing to solutions for a dignified life for everyone as long as they live.

The project focuses on the project partners' identification of common needs that European educational and training systems are facing and that can be met only by a common effort:

- The need to connect the knowledge and skills medical students acquire during their academic training with the world of work: The project connects students' academic knowledge and skills with real medical activity with the intent to optimize students' access to the real medical situations in the world of work. The project develops, for medical students, an MOOC online training in order to offer them the possibility to acquire the minimal amount of skills to allow them to properly medically interact with patients in palliative care.
- The need for multilingualism in medical education and training: Given European mobility, the role of languages in the medical context, communication and cultural issues have become very important. The project videos capture simulations of medical manoeuvres and teaching medical subjects in 6 languages, as well as situations in which doctors communicate with patients or interdisciplinary team practitioners on medical palliative topics.
- The need for a unitary system of medical education across Europe based on well documented and generally accepted educational tools: All European medical graduates should have equal chances to practice all over the EU. The project aims at identifying and elaborating fundamental standardized medical manoeuvres and palliative care skills, which are thus validated, paving the way for mainstreaming the content and the

materials. This project assists in both the standardisation of the medical procedures and in terms of the communication necessary to perform these procedures.

- The need to stimulate the flow of exchange of knowledge between higher education and medical clinics: Stimulate the collaboration between higher institutions and the world of work. Physicians and nurses working as a team provide an optimal condition for a patient's medical care and require upgraded lifelong education. Students from medicine and nursing benefit from the project online training program in palliative care skills. Universities will also develop a channel of communication that has been very weak until now.
- The need for developing transversal skills acquisition: This is encouraged for all the categories involved: ICT, communication skills, foreign languages, working in multidisciplinary teams, social responsibility, problem solving and risk management, are addressed as learning targets for the involved groups. Sharing of knowledge and peer mentoring for skills acquisition is another component.

#### **Project activities and outcomes**

- Specialized research of medical literature and practice about palliative care

The aim of this activity is to research and evaluate the medical literature on the palliative medicine procedures, reflect on the current protocols used in the training of the first year students enrolled in EU medical universities or used by the professionals and volunteers active in the medical world of work. The research is expected to lead to the elaboration of a series of standardized, consensually agreed EU procedures, supported by solid scientific evidence; these procedures form a collection used as a study guide for operational procedures on palliative medicine, widely recognized and accepted in the medical academic community at EU level and beyond

(<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Support/palliative-care>).

The result is a national and a summative EU report including indicators at EU level and beyond, to support the development of operational procedures on palliative medicine. This report paves the scientific way for the elaboration of the Guide of operational procedures on palliative medicine, meant to help medical learners prepare in terms of knowledge and especially skills, prior to their clinical years. In light of the need to acquire as much experience as possible during the study years, the medical students are encouraged to participate

in hospital medical internships in their first years of study, before they can acquire the medical foundations and deep academic understanding of all the processes that justify certain procedures and medical approaches

(<http://prevention.cancer.gov/programs-resources/programs/ccop>).

- The guide of operational procedures on palliative medicine

The Guide recommendations associated to each procedural step are aligned to the existent medical evidence, as found in the research and review of the latest medical literature; they are proposed to be implemented not only in universities but also in hospitals and hospices or by any person who may be experiencing situations of medical palliative intervention.

The objectives of the development of the operational procedures on palliative medicine are:

- to define the basic skills, minimally necessary but also sufficient to allow students to activate in the field of real medical practice – list, necessary time for rehearsal, level of knowledge and skills considered as “acceptable”
- to correlate each procedural recommendation from the guide of procedures with the latest scientific evidences that support it
- to identify any possible further need of research, in order to obtain a clear recommendation for a specific step of a procedure
- to generate a guide of operational procedures in palliative medicine widely accepted and specifically correlated with the level of evidence that exists in the latest specialized literature and which is to be implemented in European medical universities and the medical world of work, and possibly beyond it, in all basic medical interventions outside the specialized medical environment(<http://www.webmd.com/palliative-care/what-is-palliative-care>)
- to contribute to the standardization of the system of medical education and practice in Europe. In this light, a collaborative effort, involving medical partners from different countries of the European Union, to produce useful, state of the art and widely accepted educational tools for the field of palliative medicine and nursing, is an initiative that is worth being taken into consideration.
- Quality Assurance and Validation of the protocols on operational procedures on palliative medicine in the world of work

The operational procedures described in the guide in the world of work (hospitals, home cares, hospices) are tested and validated by:

- designing a quality assurance plan outlining the instruments, strategies and methodologies to be employed in order to ensure that the procedures developed comply with the highest standards of quality;
  - piloting the procedures by training staff in the world of work (hospitals, home cares, hospices);
  - evaluating and providing feedback on the procedures at EU level;
  - validating the quality and the efficiency in the medical practice of these operational procedures on palliative care and of their state of the art research of the field.
- Video support for protocols

Support audio-visual educational materials capture the procedures presented in the procedures. Each operational procedure was conceived to include all necessary steps, using a holistic approach to patients, not regarding them merely as bearers of veins or gluteus muscles, but as human beings in specific contexts laden with cultural specificities. Thus the medical content and the skills in various languages are introduced by means of a variety of medical situations in which doctors and nurses communicate with patients or in which interdisciplinary team practitioners communicate among themselves in the national language or in a foreign language on palliative medical topics, specific to the elaborated procedures.

- Medical communication linguistic resources

The videos of the procedures on palliative care are converted into language and medical communication learning materials for 6 languages. Each video presents a procedure through a communicative situation. When converting the videos into linguistic learning units the videos are considered in terms of the vocabulary, grammar structure, functions, and cultural elements present in the communicative situation. 20 linguistic units based on the 20 videos representing the 20 palliative medical procedures are to be developed, in each partner country.

- Palliative Care MOOC

The strong point of the project is the creation of an MOOC – (Open Massive Online Courses) for the palliative medical and linguistic fields. It improves learners' skills in palliative clinical manoeuvres and medical communication and intercultural skills; it encourages learners to practice skills in simulation centers; it encourages autonomous and collaborative learning; it provides open free resources available online for everybody interested in medical manoeuvres and medical

communication skills; it provides the language teachers with an educational support for the language disciplines for medical purpose. It also connects the language disciplines with the medical disciplines.

The MOOC is made up of 2 types of courses: a course on palliative care operational procedures and a language course for the medical field.

### Conclusions

The Palliative Care MOOC project helps medical staff, students and language teachers manage the environment successfully (medical situations) by ensuring sustainable medical courses on operational procedures in palliative care, in six language contexts that result in good health outcomes for patients and greater professional satisfaction for all the actors involved in a medical situation across Europe. The main reasons are:

- It offers tools to HE to accomplish its social mission of serving all the categories of public, especially the most disadvantaged in preserving their dignity and right to access to medical services and prompt intervention. Through local and regional social partnerships in all the partner countries the HE will become the hub of a network of support for people in need of palliative care and basic medical interventions. In the partnership volunteer centers, local authorities, dispensaries, youth centres, first-aid organizations, senior clubs, associations for chronic diseases, senile dementia, Alzheimer, cancer clubs, etc. are encouraged to participate.
- Thus HE offer a valuable model and create a path for public and private local medical organizations to follow by joining forces with the local and regional community to meet stringent problems locally and regionally in respect to medical and social issues.
- It optimizes the medical learning environment from an interdisciplinary point of view (medical and languages) by bringing innovative changes to medical education in a EU multilingual context.
- It promotes both collaborative and autonomous learning. The flexible nature of the MOOC courses allows learners to focus on issues of personal interest, or work with their peers by drawing upon relevant procedures in their preferred/ selected language.
- It promotes a successful motivational model that helps learners acquire applied medical and communication skills in a state-of-the-art context.

- It creates invaluable accessible and attractive learning tools that enable (in-service) physicians, students and language teachers to adopt models suitable for their practices.
- It works with higher education institutions and hospitals/hospices to integrate project findings and tools into their activity. It will act as an incentive for higher education institutions to implement the transformative changes needed to respond to the evolving medical environment.
- It stimulates the flow of communication and collaboration between higher education institutions, the world of work and the research sector with a view to finding viable common solutions for a better medical environment in the EU context.
- It forges a quality network across Europe among medical and language professionals in higher education institutions, research centres, hospitals and clinics
- It helps universities provide high-quality educational services which enhance the prestige of the higher education institutions in a sustainable environment. It stimulates a permanent quality improvement of the medical services in order for the medical institutions to be competitive in the EU context.
- It promotes a unitary system of medical education across Europe based on well documented and standardized educational tools.
- It encourages (in-service) physicians, students and language teachers to stay tuned in with the rapid development of technology. Its success will stimulate those interested to take the project findings to another level and to take advantage of the advance of technology (e.g. advanced medical and communication skills).
- Its implementation enhances the motivation of (in-service) physicians, lecturers, students and language teachers in the development of the medical field and in their own self development.
- It attempts to bridge the gap between how physicians are trained and the growing and demanding needs of our health care system (ageing populations and increasing demands for access to new treatments) in the EU context (mobility, globalization). The innovations will enable the next generation of medical lecturers and physicians to maintain the tradition of professional and clinical excellence within the European Union's evolving health care system.

#### Notes

<http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/582054>  
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Support/palliative-care>  
<http://prevention.cancer.gov/programs-resources/programs/ccop>).  
<http://www.webmd.com/palliative-care/what-is-palliative-care>