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The Ontario Workplace Health Champions Program

Incorporating occupational health content into the medical school curriculum is an ongoing challenge. In 1994, the Ontario Medical Association Section of Occupational and Environmental Medicine gathered together groups with an interest in clinical workplace health including government, universities, hospitals, research organizations and organized labour. A needs assessment was conducted and documented gaps in knowledge, skills and training related to workplace health. An occupational medicine physician (G.L.) was appointed and funded through a provincial educational project, the Physician Education Project in Workplace Health. The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) undertook a survey that documented the lack of educational activities in several of the five medical schools in Ontario. As a result of the needs assessment and survey of medical schools, the WSIB developed the Workplace Health Champions Program (WHCP).

The WHCP supports Ontario medical schools to enhance and expand their curricula in occupational health. Starting in 1999 the five (and then six) medical faculties in Ontario signed agreements with the WSIB agreeing to: (i) develop and implement a workplace health curriculum to support medical training in workplace health issues primarily at the undergraduate education level, (ii) select a physician as Workplace Health Champion (WHC) to assist in the development and implementation of a workplace curriculum, (iii) keep the WSIB informed of the progress and impacts of the curriculum in the training programme and (iv) participate with the WSIB in an evaluation of the curriculum and its impact on the training of new physicians.

The medical school selects the WHC in collaboration with the WSIB. The champions are usually occupational medicine specialists or family physicians with

a practice in occupational medicine. The WSIB provides financial support to the school to help support the champion and their work.

The champions work with the medical education and curriculum committees in their schools to identify places for occupational health content, either as sessions specifically devoted to occupational health or in other sessions such as case studies. They also offer opportunities for electives and research projects. One school is in the process of developing a video to demonstrate occupational history taking.

The six champions, an external academic advisor (D.L.H.) and the WSIB occupational disease medical director and vice president health services meet twice a year. These meetings provide an opportunity for the champions to support each other and share their experiences and resources. The WHCs recognize the challenges inherent in integrating workplace health into medical curricula. The champions worked to develop a core set of curriculum content and identify key resources.

Evaluation is an important component of the programme. Evaluation has focussed on process measures such as the activities and number of hours of workplace health training. The group has developed a core set of examination questions that can be used by the champions. One school has included specific questions on the student examination and can report student performance on workplace health content. The group is developing several objective structured clinical exam stations which can be used for evaluation.

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