



Cyberspace chat

RNs go online to discuss professional development post SARS

RNAO has been working to provide new and innovative venues for the vital exchange of information among nurses since the SARS crisis erupted last March. In mid-August, the association's Centre for Professional Nursing Excellence (CPNE) held an OpenSpace-Online® conference, the first North American organization to employ this new computer-based technology.

Titled *After SARS: Coping in the New Health-Care Normal*, the session explored how professional development needs have changed since the outbreaks. According to CPNE project manager Jennifer Jarjoura, who coordinated the session, participants' concerns went beyond the clinical know-how of battling the disease.

"The two hottest issues identified were how to build resilience of nurses in the face of future challenges and a desire to discover what worked during the SARS crisis," she says.

Participants recommended that RNAO take a leading role in arming nurses with the tools required to effectively be heard and have their concerns addressed by physi-

cians, managers and decision-makers in their workplace.

"I would like to see more on how nurses can effectively (be heard), as I think (we) are unsure how we can exercise this voice," said one participant. Another suggested RNAO better promote its internet savvy workshops to ensure more nurses take advantage of new technology, like peer support boards and chat rooms, that promote the exchange of ideas and offer a venue for nurses to share their stories.

Michelle Cooper, RN and president of Integral Visions Consulting, approached RNAO with the concept for the online discussion. "The idea was inspired by the SARS Hotline set up by RNAO," says Cooper, who co-sponsored the conference with OpenSpace Online GmbH of Germany. "Based on my experience with the (online conferencing) technology, I felt that nurses could benefit from an opportunity to dialogue about their issues and concerns, to have an opportunity to get immediate support and to share learning."

OpenSpace-Online® works by permitting users to log-in and engage in discussion groups, which are created by participants at the

beginning of the conference. Participants had to register before the conference date and time to secure a space. Once the discussion began, 12 topic areas, in the form of questions, were posted. RNs discussed everything from lessons learned to which professional development opportunities would be most helpful in a post-SARS environment.

After completing the formal discussions, participants could either review reports, explore the software or enter the "café" section of the Web site. There, one-on-one discussions and e-mail exchanges allowed conversations and networking to continue beyond the realm of the online conference.

Jarjoura says roughly two-dozen participated in the conference. "The format also removes geographic barriers. Anyone is able to participate around the world," she explains. "In fact one of the participants was from the United Arab Emirates."

Some participants had trouble logging on due to restrictions on their own desktop computer networks. Deborah Simon, Vice-President, Health Services with VHA Homehealth, says she did have to confront the firewall restriction, but was able to change the settings on her network and join the conference. And what she found impressed her.

Simon particularly enjoyed the flexibility of the online format. Since the conference was on her computer, she was able to remain in her office and address work issues as they arose.

"It was really good to be able to still work with people in the office. I could always jump back into the (online) discussion without any problems," Simon says.

Cooper says the program is a perfect extension to face-to-face focus groups and meetings. "It has tremendous possibilities to support the ongoing policy work, best practices development, education, consultation and information sharing among RNAO members, which was another reason I recommended it," she adds.

One challenge Simon noted was familiarizing herself with the "chat-room" format. Text posting can be done simultaneously by many participants, which appears as a delay to the new user. "You had to get the essence down before the discussion moved on," she says. "It was really interesting because the forum forced a lot of questions."

According to Jarjoura, Simon may get another opportunity to hone her online conferencing skills in the future.

"We plan to use it again," she says.

Information gathered during the session was used to inform RNAO's report on the nursing experience with SARS. Recommendations regarding professional development needs will be incorporated to enhance workshops offered by CPNE. **RN**