

Pharma Marketing News™

www.pharmamarketingnews.com

June 2003

Vol. 2, No. 6

Published by
VirSci Corp.

www.virsci.com

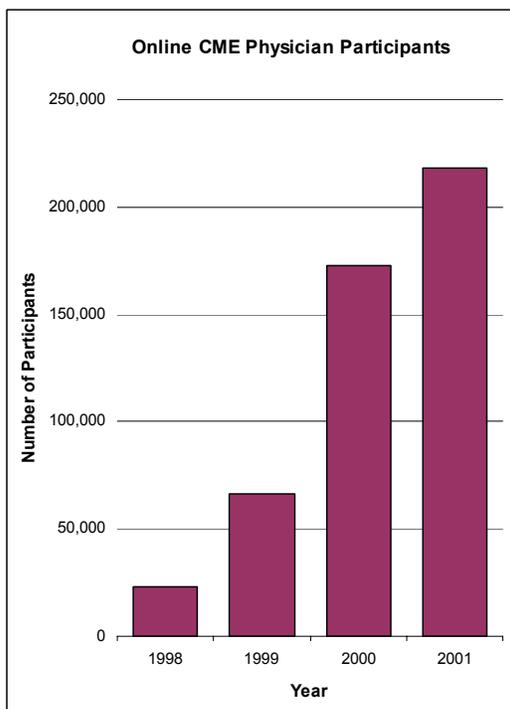
Reprint

Online CME – A Glass Half-Full or Half-Empty?

By John Mack

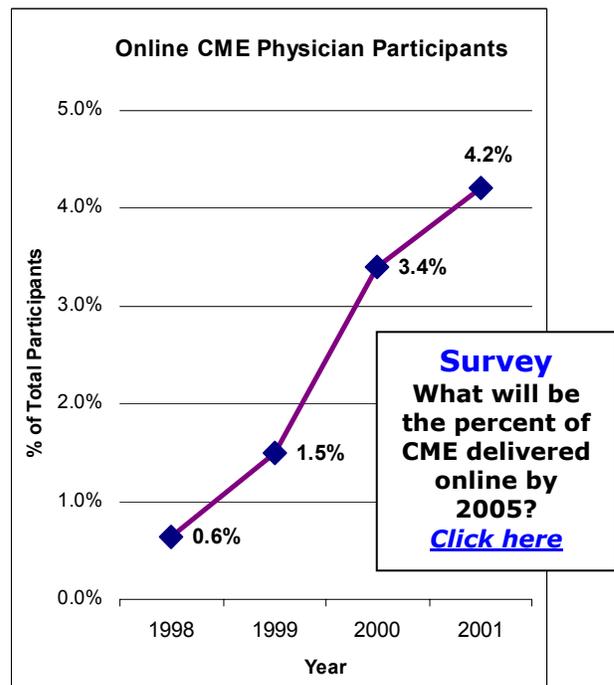
More and more physicians are completing CME courses online, according to a survey by Boston Consulting Group. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of physicians surveyed in 2002 said they completed CME course work online – up from 45 percent in 2001. Data from ACCME also show that physician registration for Internet-based CME (enduring materials) also increased (see chart below).

analysts (e.g., eHealthRx, HIRC) apply “linear best-fit trend” models to predict that this percentage will reach 8.3% by 2005. However, there was a substantial increase in 2000 at the height of the Internet boom, but the increase was less dramatic in 2001 at the beginning of the bust. It may be reasonable to assume, therefore, that the use of the Internet for CME may have leveled off or even be declining!



Source: ACCME. Physician participants in directly-sponsored plus jointly-sponsored programs (enduring materials only; not including live CME).

The percent of physician participants in online CME as a total of all physician participants, however, is very small (see chart, right). Some



Source: ACCME

Ross Martin, MD, MHA, Senior Manager Business Technology with Pfizer cites the post 9/11 security situation, the bad economy, and physicians' desire for more personal time with family as drivers for online CME growth.

In his presentation at the recent **CBI Forum on Continuing Medical Education** (see "Conference Highlights"), Martin presented an overview of Pfizer's history with eCME and its Web site www.cmecenter.com. "Plans for more advanced offerings," he said, "were limited by uncertainty regarding the ACCME rules on online CME." These rules are now available.

ACCME Policies for Internet CME

The ACCME released policies specific to Internet CME in early 2002. Several of the guidelines of interest are:

- There shall be no CME activities of an ACCME accredited provider on a pharmaceutical or device manufacturers' product website.
- With clear notification that the learner is leaving the educational website, links from the website of an ACCME accredited provider to pharmaceutical and device manufacturers' product websites are permitted before or after the educational content of a CME activity, but shall not be embedded in the educational content of a CME activity.
- Advertising of any type is prohibited within the educational content of CME activities on the Internet including, but not limited to, banner ads, subliminal ads, and pop-up window ads.
- The accredited provider must have, adhere to, and inform the learner about its policy on privacy and confidentiality that relates to the CME activities it provides on the Internet.

These guidelines are similar to guidelines for print and web versions of peer-reviewed medical journals such as the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Who Does CME Online?

According to ACCME data for 2001, a large portion of online CME is provided directly or jointly by specialty physician medical organizations, publishing companies, and schools of medicine. About 40% of online MD CME participants get enduring materials CME through these organizations, which deliver 47% of the total online hours of education. About 44% of online *live* CME is delivered by schools of medicine.

Barriers Remain

The benefits of online CME have been enunciated by many online providers. For physicians it is convenient, avoids time away from home, and it can be more interactive and entertaining (see CASE STUDY). For sponsors and commercial supporters, online CME usually costs less to produce, has a potentially wider audience, and some say that it is more likely to alter physician behavior.

So why hasn't physician use of online CME kept pace with their use of the Internet in general?

Live CME, especially when offered in the hospital setting, is also convenient and offers collegial interaction, which is not possible online. It may simply be that many physicians are unaware of online CME or don't know how to find it.

"The future of online CME," predicts Harry Levy, MD, MPH, Executive Editor of Cyberounds CME, "lies in customization – tailoring the content to reflect the knowledge level and clinical needs of each participant."

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