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CHANGING THE FACE OF LEARNING: EBRAIN AND UCL DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES IN CLINICAL NEUROLOGY

ebrain is a groundbreaking e-learning program.¹ It is an exciting and novel interactive online program in clinical neuroscience aimed at hospital trainees, consultants in neurology, and other neuroscience specialties. ebrain was developed in partnership with the Joint Neuroscience Council (JNC), University College London (UCL), the European Federation of Neurological Societies (EFNS), and the European Neurological Society (ENS). At its core is a program of 550 lectures covering the breadth of clinical neurosciences.

The history of the development of ebrain is worth noting. The concept of ebrain developed from the UK Department of Health's e-learning for health care program, which was originally conceived as a result of the shortage in the number of trained radiologists. The British Royal College of Radiologists and Department of Health collaborated in developing an information technology-based solution—an e-learning program. In view of its tremendous success, the Department of Health aimed to create e-learning programs across the whole of medicine to deliver professional health care training. The British JNC, the professional umbrella organization representing neuroscience specialties, was approached to collaborate on this project to develop the clinical neurosciences program. Simon Thomson (Consultant Neurosurgeon at Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS Trust) and Professor Simon Shorvon (Professor of Clinical Neurology at University College London) were appointed as the clinical leads on the project. The Department of Health e-learning Web site described their program as “a revolution in healthcare training in the UK” and indeed a substantial sum of money had been devoted to it. However, because of the global financial crisis, the newly elected British government culled the funding for the e-learning program overnight. Only those programs almost ready to be launched were spared, and the majority of the others, including the clinical neurosciences program, were scrapped, despite the large amount of public money that had already been spent.

It was out of this calamity that the ebrain project arose like a phoenix from the flames. The JNC, along with Simon Shorvon and Simon Thomson, decided that the idea of a clinical neuroscience e-learning program should not be abandoned. The JNC took ownership of the project and approached their various member societies for support to prevent the destruction of the concept. Extra funding was then obtained from the EFNS, ENS, and UCL, allowing the program to develop fully and transform itself into the multimedia-rich, interactive program that it is today. In addition, the team was joined by 2 new members: Dr. Hannah Cock, from St George's Hospital London and member of the ENS council; and Professor Thomas Berger, from Innsbruck Medical University in Austria and head of education at the EFNS.

Everyone worked hard on this project and within only 12 months the curriculum was developed consisting of 23 modules, each made up of 20–30 lectures, covering a wide range of clinical neuroscience topics. The curriculum was written by leading neurologists, neurosurgeons, neuropathologists, and neurophysiologists from all around the United Kingdom and also Europe. Neither the editors, authors, nor the clinical leads received any financial remuneration for their contributions and the motivation has been the desire to develop a world-first, state-of-the-art educational tool that will be a tribute to the quality of teaching in the United Kingdom and Europe. The lack of bureaucratic involvement has also meant that the final program was developed at a fraction of the cost compared with the figures that were being proposed by the Department of Health.

This was an uphill task, but successful. ebrain was officially launched on November 25, 2011, at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. All clinical leads and the chairman of the JNC, John Pickard, spoke very enthusiastically about this project, which is truly one-of-a-kind. The online training sessions integrate traditional teaching methods with novel, interactive tools such as videos, high-quality images, and animations. It has many advantages when compared to a conventional textbook, not only because of these added components, but because unlike textbooks it can be continually updated as

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scientific advances occur. In addition, a key feature of the program is the feedback page at the end of each lecture. Candidates will forfeit the award of a certificate at the end of each session by failing to complete the feedback form. This ensures continuous internal auditing and as a result provides a system for ongoing development and improvement. The course material includes clear objectives at the start of each lecture and a handful of multiple-choice questions at the end for self-assessment. Access to ebrain is via the Web site at <http://www.ebrainjnc.com>. In the United Kingdom, ebrain is free for neuroscience clinicians through their JNC membership and for European neurologists through their EFNS and ENS memberships. Access to ebrain outside of these aforementioned organizations is also possible by alternative arrangements.

The ebrain course is also at the center of the Distance Learning Postgraduate Courses in Clinical Neurology being offered by UCL. These courses, like ebrain, are a new development in global clinical neurologic training. Candidates subscribing to these courses complete the modules remotely from the comfort of their own computer at home, work, or elsewhere and in their own time. They have dedicated online support in the form of a clinical tutor based at UCL Institute of

Neurology, Queen Square, in London. The tutors provide regular online “face-to-face” tutorials (conducted via Skype) to guide the candidates through the course material, which includes ebrain, other online teaching, and the recently published *Queen Square Textbook of Neurology*. On completion, candidates are awarded these UCL degrees, which are an invaluable asset to clinical neuroscience trainees, consultants, or even those in allied specialties who have a keen interest in neurology. UCL is ranked second in the world, and first in Europe, in Neuroscience and Behavior by Thomson ISI Essential Science Indicators.

For the future, there are ambitious plans for the further development of ebrain. These involve transmitting lectures live from conferences around the world via this medium. This would be a groundbreaking step for medical education and one that does not seem to be too far around the corner.

DISCLOSURE

The author reports no disclosures relevant to the manuscript. **Go to Neurology.org for full disclosures.**

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