

Chicken Soup for the Doctor's Soul:
unique day in physician health a resounding success

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Art therapy, music composition, story-telling, and an interactive session fashioned after the traditions of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting were among the activities featured during a unique, day-long workshop designed to enhance physicians' personal health and well-being.

"Chicken Soup for the Doctor's Soul," conceived and developed by the OMA Physician Health Program (PHP) and the Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine (CSAM), was a pre-conference event held in conjunction with CSAM's October 2000 annual scientific and business meeting in Ottawa.

A total of 26 physicians, instructors, and related health professionals from across Canada participated in the day's proceedings (including one non-registered physician who came upon the workshop while looking for an entirely different session and decided to remain for the day).

"In planning the workshop, we envisioned an experiential, rather than the usual didactic, approach to addressing physician health issues — everything from substance use disorders to marital and mental health problems," said Dr. Michael Kaufmann, director of the Physician Health Program.

"We wanted to encourage and facilitate interaction and exchange among participants, and between participants and session leaders, as a way of enhancing physician health and well-being, rather than simply having someone standing in front of a group of doctors and talking 'at them' about statistics and issues surrounding physician health."

Sessions

The workshop began with the first-ever "Doctor's Anonymous" meeting. A mutual support session developed and chaired by Dr. Kaufmann, the meeting was based on the PHP's "12 Steps for Medical Professionals Who Seek Rehumanizing" — guidelines to assist physicians in achieving improved physical, social, emotional, and even spiritual health. (The "12 Steps for Medical Professionals" appeared in the October 1999 – May 2000 "Physician Health" columns published in the Ontario Medical Review. The columns also are also posted online at www.oma.org/php/12steps.htm).

The intense, hour-long morning session featured a handful of participants discussing selected steps as they related to their own personal experiences with a variety of issues, such as overcoming a sense of isolation in one's life, striking a balance between work and family, dealing with the deterioration of an important relationship, and, in some cases, using unhealthy coping mechanisms to address these and other problems.

“The results of this part of the workshop were incredible,” said Dr. Kaufmann. “Participants really connected with the speakers. The 12 steps were brought to life through the experiences of these doctors.”

The morning portion of the workshop continued with a session entitled “Stories that Heal and Inspire,” in which the narrative form was used to explore participants’ feelings and experiences.

Led by Ottawa physician Roy Salole, Chair of the OMA Section on GP Psychotherapy, and Dr. Raju Hajela, an addiction medicine practitioner from Kingston, this session encouraged physicians to share stories from their personal and professional lives, or stories they found inspirational or meaningful to them in some way.

“Again,” said Dr. Kaufmann, “the results were great. The support group meeting had ‘primed’ the doctors to participate in the story-telling session, which featured themes ranging from the mythological to the reality-based. Other participants recounted relevant stories from their own personal experiences.”

While the support meeting and story-telling components of the workshop were intense and emotionally challenging, they succeeded in bringing participants together in a way that was “intimate and powerful,” said Dr. Kaufmann, “and in setting the tone for the rest of the day by getting everyone involved in the process at the outset.”

The afternoon sessions offered somewhat lighter fare, including “Art Therapy: a Look Beneath the Records, Reports, and Diagnostic Information,” a music appreciation program entitled “Feeling Good with the Blues,” and an introduction to the ancient martial art known as Tai Chi.

The art therapy session, led by professional artist Nancy Currie, explored the power of art as a form of personal expression. Participants were provided with a variety of materials with which to create, including paints, paper, scissors, glue, boxes, wood, and magazines.

“The instructor simply told us each to make ‘something’ using the boxes and the materials provided,” explained Judi Platt, a case manager with the Physician Health Program and participant in the art therapy session.

The completed works were then “analyzed” by their respective creators, in conjunction with the session leader.

“We were asked to explain our creations, layer by layer,” said Ms. Platt. “Participants were honest and open as they presented their finished work, using their art piece as a visual form of sharing their thoughts, feelings and vulnerabilities.”

The session concluded with a group creation, in which participants were told to work collaboratively to complete a design. This portion of the session provided participants with “a sense of community,” said Ms. Platt. “It was obvious that those who participated had gained insight into themselves and each other.”

“Feeling Good with the Blues,” an idea conceived by Dr. Kaufmann, featured semi-professional blues guitarist Dr. Brian Waters, a Toronto dentist, as session leader. Participants were given a brief history of the blues, along with a listing of “Blues Rules” — a humorous inventory of the typical conventions used in blues-style song-writing — before settling down to the task of actually composing an original “blues” tune.

Following the simple rules laid out by Dr. Waters, participants were encouraged to pick a theme or story, and then collectively create some blues-type lyrics with which to narrate it. The lyrics were then put to music by Dr. Waters and performed by participants, as a group, at the end of the session.

“Once again, I was pleased to see how good everyone seemed to feel when they got into ‘the blues,’” said Dr. Kaufmann. “Music is just another effective way for people to express their feelings while, hopefully, gaining some insight into themselves.”

During the exercise portion of the workshop, Michael Babin, a senior instructor at the Tai Chi Studio in Ottawa, provided participants with a brief overview of the evolution of this ancient art — from its origins as a method used to train soldiers for combat, to its current incarnation as a gentle form of exercise used to strengthen and tone muscles, promote relaxation, and improve hand-eye co-ordination — before leading them in some basic Tai Chi exercises.

A “show and tell” session, during which participants shared the accomplishments of their afternoon workshops and some of the energy and positive emotion that resulted, concluded the day’s proceedings.

Evaluation forms completed by participants at the end of the workshop expressed significant satisfaction with each session presented, along with feelings of gratitude, enthusiasm, and the hope that similar sessions will be made available in the future.

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“Chicken Soup for the Doctor’s Soul” is accredited for CME hours in support of maintenance of certification for the College of Family Physicians of Canada. To obtain further information on the OMA Physician Health Program, contact the PHP toll-free at 1-800-851-6606.