



education & training

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Podcasts for psychiatrists: a new way of learning

Digitalisation of the world is a fast-growing reality and the world of medicine, or indeed psychiatry, has not been left behind. Internet and the World Wide Web revolutionised the way we access information, and the medical profession has taken full advantage of it. But now, podcasts are set to change the way information is delivered. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has already started its podcasts and seems to be at the forefront of this revolution in mass communication within the medical community.

But can podcasts be turned into a new tool for learning? Can they change the way training is delivered? How relevant are they to psychiatrists, their trainees and their patients? We look at the technology, current podcasts available to us, the possibilities for the future and the difficulties that it may pose.

Technology

Podcasts are multimedia files, mainly audio, distributed over the internet. These can be downloaded to a personal computer or a mobile device (such as an MP3 player) to listen to. Video podcasts are also gaining popularity. It is like listening to a personalised radio programme at one's own leisure. Subscription to podcasts is usually free and the biggest advantage is that once the computer is set up to receive podcasts (usually by clicking on an orange icon or the letters 'RSS'), the computer automatically searches for them, and whenever a new podcast is available it is downloaded to the computer to listen to the next time the user logs on.

History

According to Wikipedia (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcast>), regular podcasts first started becoming available on the internet in 2003. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* declared 'podcasting' the 2005 word of the year, defining the term as 'a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player'.

Nowadays, it is common for news channels and newspapers to have regular podcasts on their websites covering a wide range of topics.

Available podcasts for psychiatrists

The Royal College of Psychiatrists launched its podcasts in October 2006 and promises to bring 'the very latest breakthroughs and discoveries in neurosciences, psychiatry and psychology'. Every month, the podcasts feature interviews with authors whose articles may have been published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*. There are two types of podcasts one can be accessed from the main College website (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pressparliament/podcasts.aspx>) and is for anyone interested in the subject. This is based on the actual paper, with a link to the abstract (however, to access the full text a valid subscription to the *Journal* is needed). The other type of podcast is for continuing professional development (CPD) purposes (<http://www.psychiatrycpd.org>). In this section, not only the article but also the wider context of the topic is covered in a podcast format. A module test is linked to each of these podcasts, which usually have ten multiple choice questions. Users can do the module before listening to the podcast and then later to see how much they improved their score. Once the module is adequately completed, CPD points can be earned. This is a unique venture for the College. Such an initiative for online CPD is not yet available from any Royal College or Psychiatric Association in the UK or elsewhere.

The *American Journal of Psychiatry* has a link on its homepage (<http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org>) for continuing medical education (CME). This gives a list of courses, either sorted by date or subject, approved for CME. There is also an 'Audio' link which is the podcast link of the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and features highlights from each issue of the journal. The text of this audio link is also available but CPD is not incorporated. The third link is personal digital assistant (PDA). Once the software is downloaded on to a PDA, content is automatically updated. This includes table of contents, article abstracts, and full text of 'in this issue' and editorials from the current issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. The above are freely available. Also, table of contents along with the full text of articles, columns, and letters from the current issue of *Psychiatric News* can be downloaded to a PDA.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) website (see <http://www.psych.org>) has a limited online video-cast for CME activity. At the time of writing there are



three 20 min videocasts on 'Principles of psychodynamic therapy'. Both APA members and non-members have to pay a fee to access this videocast, the fee being slightly higher for non-members. Only psychiatric residents and training directors can get free access.

An internet search of all the other Royal Colleges in England and Wales showed that at the time of writing none had a link to regular podcasts on their homepage.

In the UK, <http://www.doctors.net.uk/podcast> was the first website to start podcasting, specifically aimed at the medical profession. Its podcast was launched in February 2006 and is broadcast monthly. The website claims to feature on its podcasts 'news and interviews on key medical events'. The podcasts are only available to doctors registered with the General Medical Council who are also registered with the website. Members can give comments and feedback on the podcasts.

A pharmaceutical company is currently piloting podcasts aimed at psychiatrists in the UK. The aim is to have monthly broadcasts of 30 min duration. The company claims that it would be 'non-promotional'. Contents of four pilots to date have included latest news, interviews, discussions and literature reviews.

Relevance for teaching and training

Although presently podcasts are mainly being used as an information tool, the potential for developing as a learning tool is immense. Podcasts can take on some role in delivering training and teaching modules specific to the subscriber's need. For example, trainees may be more interested in modules to help them practise workplace-based assessments. As this is a new and rapidly changing area, podcasts can be ideal to keep up to date without the hassle of trawling through websites for recent additions. With video podcasts being the future, case studies, case presentations and various aspects of mental state examination can be made available for teaching purposes. For medical students, growing up on e-learning, and very comfortable with podcasts, it can become a good way of engaging with the students. Not only is the content important but its delivery even more so. It is like a supermarket, not only having the right stuff in its warehouse but also ensuring a good supply chain. The College can build a unique rapport with medical students through podcasts. This might prove useful in recruitment and retention in the future.

Continuing professional development is an important issue for all medical professionals. However, with imminent cuts on study leave budgets and not everyone having access to pharmaceutical funding to attend various conferences and meetings, we may be in a situation where ongoing learning may be difficult to access. Lectures, seminars and discussions from various conferences and meetings across the globe can be made available through podcasts, and relatively reduced costs, with added convenience, can prove to be a bonus.

Also, as podcasts develop, members can get actively involved in contributing to their content. This would of course be another way of enhancing one's own learning experience.

Relevance as information tool

Latest news, conference updates, College responses, College reports, membership issues, etc can be podcasted. The advantage of podcasts is that a psychiatrist can subscribe to the relevant 'feeds' they may be interested in. This would avoid information overload, but automatic updates would ensure minimal information loss. Another advantage is better time management. One can easily listen to podcasts on the move, such as while commuting on a train or travelling in a car.

For trainees, updates on curriculum, examinations and training issues would be very relevant. The information section of the College produces various leaflets for service users and carers. Podcasts can become a mass communication tool, which can be focused, quick and individually tailored to the subscriber's need. As it would be more relevant to the subscriber, it would probably have a higher take-up rate.

Disadvantages

To introduce any new technology on a large scale involves expenditure. The initial costs could be high, but as the uptake increases, costs would go down. If one looks at the amount of 'snail mail' one gets from the College on a weekly basis, one can start to estimate the reduction in costs once podcasts take over some of that role. Not everyone is familiar with podcasts, but this is the case with every new technology. However, the success of new technology depends on how easy it is to use. Thankfully, podcasts are simple, straightforward and uncomplicated pieces of digital broadcasts that may be difficult to put down once we get used to them.

The other issue is about copyright and confidentiality. Legal requirements will have to be followed and podcast editors of the future would have to ensure full adherence to those requirements.

Discussion

A learning tool is likely to be effective if it is readily accessible, easy to use, freely available, saves time and effort and is cost-effective. Podcasts do seem to fulfil most of these and have the potential to become an important learning tool for the future.

It seems that the era of learning is moving from e-learning to 'mobile' learning. It remains to be seen if we are able to take advantage of the technology available to improve our learning experience.

Declaration of interest

V.A. is a member of an advisory board for Janssen-Cilag on piloting its podcasts for psychiatrists.

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