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## Spotlight on learning outcomes

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Although the topic of learning outcomes has figured in educational meetings and publications for a number of years, this year's AMEE meeting brought a notable number of contributions on outcomes at undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing educational levels and across the professions. Both in a symposium devoted to the topic and in free communication and poster sessions, AMEE contributors demonstrated a variety of examples of how outcomes have been devised and, more importantly, are being used at course and programme level, in individual institutions, in local or national collaborations and across nations.

Inevitably, with so many different examples on show, there were comparisons and some discussion as to which were "best" or whether or not they could/should all be amalgamated in one global template. In these days of electronic linkage, however, such unification, with its danger of monotone, may not matter. Indeed there may be distinct advantages in being able to compare and contrast locally agreed outcomes with those from elsewhere.

It does seem that the specification and definition of learning outcomes is still mainly the province of the course or curriculum planner, although there were a few examples where the teacher – and a very few where learner and public – were directly involved at the planning level. Outcomes can now be used in so many different ways that ensuring that they are not seen as some sort of top-down educational management system is an issue that needs attention. Why do we still neglect issues of "ownership"?

Despite all the activity and interest in outcomes – and not just at the AMEE meeting – there is still really very little evidence, maybe even interest, in how learning outcomes affect learning. None of the AMEE presentations really addressed this issue. Although it is almost intuitive that they would have a positive effect on learning, we know almost nothing about how different types of outcomes and how they're presented actually affect the learner. Those promoting their use would do us a service if they paid attention to this area: there are surely some important messages.

How are learning outcomes being used? In a few cases, the answer seems to be apparently largely as "icing on the cake". It did seem strange that in an educational arena like AMEE, one or two of the presentations suggested that the list of outcomes was in itself the end product. It is of course a major step, but really only the start to the process of outcome-based education, by which I mean the situation where learning outcomes, curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and staff development are all aligned and focussed on the end product. This clearly is beginning to gather momentum and those involved recognise that the process will not be quick, easy or cheap.

Prideaux (2004) said "*defining appropriate and defensible outcomes and ensuring they are attained is core business for all medical educators*". In fact, the move to outcome-based education, which is the way learning outcomes are leading us, is going to ensure that it's not just core business, but big business.

Finally, there remains the most important question of all and one no different for any educational intervention – will developments in this area produce better doctors and improve the health of the people?

Prideaux D. (2004) Clarity of outcomes in medical education: do we know if it makes a difference? *Medical Education*, 38, pp. 580-581