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Preparing Students for a Telehealth Future

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As healthcare professionals around the country scrambled to implement, learn, and adapt to telehealth technologies during the last year, the Wisconsin Area Health Education Center (AHEC) has searched for a way to make the transition easier for future healthcare workers.

“We work a lot with healthcare students, and we wanted them to be able to jump right into telehealth, if needed, when they began to practice,” said Annie Short, executive director of AHEC in Wisconsin. “Many people are still trying to learn about telehealth, and our students are being thrust into this new world. Although most students understand how the technology works, telehealth is still different than working in a regular healthcare practice. There are still skills, communication and processes to consider for an effective and positive patient visit.”

The mission of Wisconsin AHEC is to improve access to quality healthcare by developing community-based health professional training programs and enhancing education resources across the state. The organization began working with the Great Plains Telehealth Resource Center (gpTRAC) to implement its telehealth certificate program for its students. AHEC received grant funding to create the program.

“We’re doing a live Zoom session with about a dozen students as a pilot program,” Short explained. “We anticipate it will last about 2.5 hours. Then, students will complete individual 15-minute sessions to practice their skills and receive personal feedback.”

The Wisconsin AHEC plans to collect feedback during the pilot program about any other topics that may need to be covered and then record another training session that can be used on an ongoing basis. Future students and healthcare professionals seeking continuing education credits would then be able to watch the recorded session and then record themselves doing a telehealth session for individual review.

In order to meet the requirements of the grant funding, Wisconsin AHEC needed to offer the program to a variety of healthcare sectors. The pilot program will include students in pharmacy, medicine, social work, and nursing.

“We are also going to be holding a panel discussion as part of the training where current healthcare professionals can share their experiences with students,” Short said. “They will explain some of the things they had to overcome in adapting to telehealth and how they used it in their own practices.”

Wisconsin AHEC plans to incorporate the telehealth certificate program into its AHEC Scholars Program, which is a program designed for students graduating within the next two years. “We want to find ways to transform our students’ understanding and learning so they are work-ready,” Short said. “This telehealth certificate program will truly help with that mission.”

Adapting to a Virtual World

Like most businesses and organizations today, the Wisconsin Area Health Education Center (AHEC) had to shift many of its programs and events to a virtual platform over the past year due to COVID-19 restrictions.

“We offer many community-based programs to provide real-world practice for our students,” said Annie Short, regional director of AHEC in Wisconsin. “We had to shift all our programs to virtual. For example, we do a spotlight on the Hmong population. In the past, our students were immersed in their culture and got together to make egg rolls on the last day. This year, we had to send recipes and gift cards for that activity to be done virtually. We tried to find ways to make the activities fun.”

In addition, AHEC moved its interprofessional case competition, which usually required students to present cases in front of judges, to an online platform as well.