EDITOR'S CHOICE

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Will MOOCs transform medicine?

Edward Davies *US news and features editor, BMJ*

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have received a lot of attention in recent months. They are being variously credited with everything from improving social mobility to transforming the economics of education. As one essayist wrote in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last year, "In an era with a perfect video-delivery platform [online], why would anyone waste precious class time on a lecture?" (doi:10.1056/NEJMp1202451)

The premise of MOOCs is implicit in the name—online courses delivered and open to a massive number of people. Some of the benefits of delivering education online like this are obvious; the constraints on time and space dictated by a lecture theatre are immediately overcome, and the cost and inconvenience of getting to a single location are removed. Education can be handily fitted into the lives of those wishing to be educated.

But there are downsides as well. As an article in this week's *New York Times* points out: "While the courses have enrolled millions of students around the world, most who enroll never start a single assignment, and very few complete the courses." Evidence as to how well the courses work is thin (www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/education/colleges-adapt-online-courses-to-ease-burden.html?ref=tamarlewin&_r=0).

Then, of course, there are the benefits and challenges that are specific, if not exclusive, to a medical education. Ben Harder

explores these in a feature in this week's *BMJ* (doi:10.1136/bmj.f2666).

He finds both enthusiasts and sceptics for the new modality, with one noteworthy example suggesting that, in medical education, MOOCs are unlikely to become the norm.

Harry Goldberg, molecular biophysicist at Johns Hopkins University, offers an informed opinion: for the past 15 years he and a team of faculty colleagues have been making taped lectures available to medical students taking a course on cardiovascular physiology. Now, the university offers one of academia's more comprehensive online course catalogs in the health sciences.

But Goldberg is circumspect. MOOCs have a role in medical education, he says, but he thinks that role is a lot smaller than people hope it will be. That's mainly because lecture style didactics—or "content delivery," in the parlance of the web—are just one small piece of the overall learning experience in medicine.

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