

peer reviewed **ARTICLE OF INTEREST**

# Is there a difference between a congress, conference, symposium, seminar, journal club, and workshop in terms of continuing professional development activities?

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## Abstract

The Society of Radiographers of South Africa (SORSA) has been an accredited continuing professional development (CPD) service provider since circa 2003. However, misinterpretation among various stakeholders of what particular activities encompassed has raised concerns of the validity and appropriate awarding of continuing education units (CEUs) to presenters at some CPD events. There seems to be lack of consensus of the definition of once-off activities in terms of the number of CEUs awarded to presenters. This paper therefore argues the need for standardised definitions in the glossary of the CPD guidelines of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) regarding congresses, conferences, symposia, seminars, journal clubs, and workshops, to avoid the concerns highlighted. This paper unpacks definitions of some CPD activities to illustrate the need of a glossary that would reduce the risk of presenters and authors not being awarded appropriate CEUs in accordance with the HPCSA guidelines.

**Keywords** Validity of activities; CPD guidelines; HPCSA; CEUs

## INTRODUCTION

The Society of Radiographers of South Africa (SORSA) has organised and hosted at least 1500 continuing professional development (CPD) events to date. The first event was a congress in 1972. The success of this inaugural congress showed there was a need to continue offering programmes to meet radiographers' needs. This resulted in the regular hosting of congresses, workshops, and morning or day CPD seminars. In 1996 the National Commission on Higher Education highlighted that there was a need for continuing education of health professionals and that this should be linked to re-registration. The report further stressed that the focus of a continuing education programme should be to enable healthcare professionals to keep abreast with the advancements they will face in the healthcare environment.<sup>[1]</sup> In January 1998 SORSA launched a voluntary CPD scheme for members. The scheme had four objectives: to encourage members to become actively involved in ongoing CPD in the interests of their personal professional development; to enhance the public image of the profession by encouraging high standards of practice; to advance the profession through continuous development of practicing radiographers; to prepare members for the time when CPD is compulsory.<sup>[2]</sup> There was a range of activities in the CPD scheme for radiographers and presenters

of oral presentations or posters at CPD events. However, no definitions were provided to define the focus and programme of each activity.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the early 2000s the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) made it mandatory for radiographers to obtain 30 continuing education units (CEUs) every 12 months. In order to meet this mandatory requirement, radiographers must attend or participate in particular activities that are deemed valid CPD activities by the HPCSA as per their CPD guidelines for health practitioners.<sup>[3]</sup> The HPCSA provides criteria and guidelines for service providers who wish to offer CPD events.<sup>[4]</sup> The HPCSA does make a distinction between once-off activities and those that are available on an ongoing basis. The former include, for example, breakfast meetings and case study discussions. The latter include, for example, congresses and symposia. However, there are no definitions for any of the listed activities in the HPCSA documents.<sup>[3,4]</sup> A survey study conducted in 2015 by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Financial Planning Institute of South Africa (FPI) found that across professional bodies there was inconsistent use in the classification of CPD activities and this resulted in varying interpretations of what each activity entails.<sup>[5]</sup>

This paper thus argues that there is a need for definitions of the different CPD events.

Professional bodies internationally and nationally do not provide clear definitions of the scope of varying CPD activities.<sup>[6,7]</sup> This underscores the need for consensus as to what is meant when CPD events are called seminars, workshops, etc. It is important that presenters at CPD events are awarded the correct number of CEUs. According to the HPCSA guidelines one CEU is awarded for each one hour for attendees at once-off activities; presenters can be allocated double CEUs.<sup>[3]</sup> On the other hand 10 CEUs are awarded to a principal presenter at an accredited congress.

## AN ARGUMENT FOR THE NEED FOR DEFINITIONS OF CPD ACTIVITIES

Over the decades radiographers have attended CPD events hosted by SORSA, and many have presented papers at, for example, congresses and so-called one-day or morning 'seminars.' These 'seminars' like national congresses, have a programme with a range of papers in terms of the overall theme. The abstracts for 'seminars' are peer reviewed for acceptance. Time allocated for each presentation by experts in their field varies from 15 minutes to one hour (the programmes range from five to seven hours). I personally believe the use of the term seminar for these CPD events, offered by the SORSA since the late 1970s, is not correct. They are scientific events that provide a range of topics on the programme in keeping with

the HPCSA's criteria and guidelines for service providers. Most of these 'seminar' programmes include papers on the latest developments in radiography (patient related service delivery, management, education, for example) as well as papers that address bioethical principles that determine how health professionals perform research and interact with patients/clients and society.

The HPCSA's CPD guidelines for health practitioners do not include definitions for conference, congress, symposium, and seminar, for example.<sup>[3]</sup> The number of CEUs for presenters/co-presenters is listed on page 15 section 2.1.2 'Activities that are managed within rules of an accredited structure (HEI and/or Professional Organisations)', for a paper/poster at congress/symposium/refreshers course. However, seminar presentations are not included in section 2.1.2.<sup>[3]</sup>

A guideline can be described as recommended advice that guides both the nature and action required on achieving a particular task or even a requirement; but allowing for some alternative options regarding interpretation and application thereof.<sup>[8,9]</sup> Considering the current HPCSA's CPD guidelines, consistent standardised actionable advice is not provided. Inconsistent and even inappropriate activities, in the absence of clear definitions, probably affect all practitioners across the 12 professional boards of the HPCSA. It can further be argued that if the expectation of the mandatory CPD programme, suggested by the HPCSA, should be meaningful in terms of life-long learning and keeping abreast with advancement of new practices in healthcare, that the guideline documents should be compiled in a manner that CPD activity providers know exactly how to possibly go about presenting these activities.

There is an anecdotal report that a representative of HPCSA stated that a presenter at a seminar is only awarded one additional CEU compared to those only attending the event. No such definition is in the two HPCSA documents.<sup>[3,4]</sup> This further highlights the importance of clear definitions so that potential presenters know in advance the number of CEUs they may be awarded. It is also unclear whether a presenter, at a once-off CPD activity, must present for one hour to be awarded two CEUs.

There is clearly an urgent need to address these gaps in the HPCSA CPD documents

in terms of the interpretation and application of the guidelines. These gaps thus raise the question: What are the HPCSA's definitions for the various activities? An argument is therefore put forth that the glossary in the current HPCSA CPD guidelines document should include definitions for a congress, conference, symposium and seminar. This would eliminate misinterpretations and confusion among service providers. Definitions would ensure that presenters are awarded the relevant CEUs in accordance to the correct activity level. The glossary should also indicate the minimum duration of a presentation at a once-off CPD activity in order for a presenter to be awarded double CEUs.

The following definitions are proposed for a congress, conference, symposium, seminar, journal club and workshop.

#### • Congress and conference

A formal scientific congregation where professionals in the same, similar or associated fields of study or interest, convene to discuss and share their views on particular topics. This activity typically lasts for a few days with parallel sessions.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

#### • Symposium

A symposium is taken to be a scientific gathering that is smaller than a congress/conference. It could focus on a specific debate/topic. The topics are usually presented by individuals that work extensively in the particular field.<sup>[11]</sup> This definition thus could be used to cover a broad theme pertaining to a subject of interest. For example, a one-day symposium on advances in radiographic imaging.

#### • Seminar

The Merriam-Webster dictionary<sup>[12]</sup> defines a seminar as: a group of advanced students studying under a professor with each doing original research and all exchanging results through reports and discussions; a course of study pursued by a seminar; an advanced or graduate course often featuring informality and discussion; a scheduled meeting of a seminar or a room for such meetings; and a meeting for giving and discussing information. The Collins Dictionary<sup>[13]</sup> defines a seminar as: (1) a small group of students meeting regularly under the guidance of a tutor, professor, etc.; (2) one such meeting or the place in which it is held; (3) a higher course for postgraduates; (4) any group or meeting for holding discussion or exchanging information.

In other words, a CPD seminar could

refer to an activity within an academic setting for a small group of students. This would then mean a presenter at such a seminar, as per the above definitions, could be awarded CEUs as per section 2.1.1 of the HPCSA CPD guidelines (i.e. once-off activities).<sup>[3]</sup>

#### • Journal club

Journal clubs have been used for many years and are frequent activities in medical curricula. More recently they have been used by other health professions as a means for health professionals to keep abreast with the advances in their respective fields and to develop research skills. During journal clubs participants critically read and engage with journal articles and discuss these around a particular theme which further informs practice and creates awareness of current research being done. This is particularly done at regular intervals.<sup>[14,15,16]</sup> By implication these are considered therefore as once-off activities.

#### • Workshop

Workshops are activities in which participants engage and discuss a specific topic or theme for debate in a robust and intensive manner. Participants share their experiences or knowledge in relation to the topic or theme being engaged with and discussed. They may also include 'hands on' activities, for example a training session on how to perform a new technique.<sup>[17,18]</sup> Workshops can therefore be once-off activities or on-going activities when they form part of a congress/conference.

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the differences between six activities that are deemed acceptable for consideration as CPD activities as per the HPCSA CPD guidelines. It is important that SORSA uses the above definitions for congresses, conferences, symposia, seminars, journal clubs and workshops. It is recommended that SORSA should request the HPCSA to include definitions of CPD activities in their respective guidelines for health practitioners and service providers. It is argued that there should be no ambiguity in terms of interpreting and implementing CEUs for both attendees and presenters at CPD events.

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