Continuing Education Among Athletic Trainers: A Qualitative Study
Samdperil, G: Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT

Context: Continuing education (CE) is intended to promote ongoing competence, in the areas of knowledge and clinical skills, as well as to increase expertise that enhances professional practice. CE provides Certified Athletic trainers (ATs) the opportunity for professional growth through intellectual engagement in meaningful learning through formal activities (e.g., conferences, symposiums, and workshops). Furthermore, CE helps foster a change in clinical decision making and clinical behaviors resulting in a change in patient care.

Objective: The purpose of this study is to examine ATs participation in continuing education and its perceived impact on clinical practice. Included in this study is an analysis of the selection process, motivation factors to participate, and barriers preventing participation are evaluated. Furthermore, job setting characteristics which positively or negatively influence implementation of new information into clinical practice were also evaluated.

Design: A descriptive study with a qualitative design was followed with formal interviews and the collection of fieldnotes. Setting: Individual interviews were conducted at each of the participant’s work sites, except for one which was conducted at the researcher’s institution. Patients or Other Participants: The 15 participants for this study consisted of five representatives from each of the three primary employment settings for athletic trainers: colleges/universities, secondary schools and sports medicine clinics. Only currently practicing athletic trainers were selected to participate in the process. All participants had been certified for a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 10 years. Data Collection and Analysis: Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the data, using Atlas 5.1 to code transcripts and identify emerging trends among the participants and subgroups, was used. Results: Findings revealed three emerging trends among all group participants that impacted participation in continuing education including: 1) timing of CE activity, 2) content relevance to current job setting, and 3) the perceived value and culture of continuing education at the work setting. Among the sub-groups, trends were identified in the areas of financial reimbursement, perceived value of professional development by employer, and the ability to meet learning goals and objectives through CE activities. Conclusion: Universally, the most profound influence found to determine participation in CE activities was timing. Athletic trainers, regardless of work setting, felt an obligation to be at work, despite the reason for absents. For those who did not receive financial support from their employer (all public high school athletic trainers) cost was a major barrier. Many selected on-line CE learning opportunities to minimize cost and impact on the employment setting. Most athletic trainers discussed the need to attend CE activities during the summer months to decrease or eliminate any impact on their employer. Word Count: 450