Student Laptop Program at Dalhousie

By Blaine M. Cleghorn, DMD, MS

In 2005, Dalhousie’s faculty of dentistry became the first dental school in Canada to introduce a student laptop program based on the VitalSource library of electronic textbooks. The laptop program included a staged implementation plan, which began by providing all full-time faculty members with the complete electronic library one year before the students. This gave professors time to learn how to use the software and integrate the material into their courses.

Faculty members were offered multiple orientation sessions, both in small groups and one-on-one. These training sessions were complemented with weekly troubleshooting meetings and a website featuring common questions and answers, as well as tips showing how other faculty members had integrated the electronic library into their respective courses. When Dalhousie’s 2006 DDS1 class arrived in September—the first group of dental students to participate in the student laptop program—the faculty members were well prepared to answer questions and use the electronic resources effectively.

The laptop program contains over 70 electronic textbooks preinstalled on each student’s computer. The electronic library of first-year students includes all of the required textbooks for their entire 4-year undergraduate curriculum. The VitalSource software has a search engine that allows students to search for specific topics throughout the entire library, giving them access to all of their course materials—whenever it is required.

The Dalhousie dentistry students are fans of the program. “What I really like about the laptop program is that it allows me to search dozens of textbooks for information and figures in seconds,” says Marianne Dobbin. “It’s convenient to have full-colour photos and videos available while studying or working on preclinical exercises in the clinic or lab.”

The operating system and software for the laptops are standardized, allowing for a consistent appearance and operation and more efficient and cost-effective network support.

Books can be highlighted, notes can be attached and the information can be organized and customized by individual students in a variety of ways. Notes can also be shared among students and faculty members, and all notes and highlights can be synchronized among the computers used by each student. Course material can also be delivered using modern technologies such as Quicktime Virtual Reality and streaming video. Electronic delivery of course materials enables instructors to provide timely updates and greatly reduces the number of paper handouts.

“Carrying a 5-pound laptop is far better than lugging textbooks and paper notes needed for each day,” adds student Chad Henderson. “If I need to look up something, within seconds I can quickly search all my notes or textbooks for all the years I’ve been at dental school.”

The student laptop program is the first stage in a multi-year plan to provide electronic access to textbooks, course material developed by faculty and the clinic information system, as Dalhousie moves toward a comprehensive electronic curriculum and, ultimately, a paperless patient record.

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