The Clinical Lipid Specialist

John C. LaRosa, MD, Chairman
Task Force on Cholesterol Issues, American Heart Association

Over the last few years, a consensus has emerged concerning the need to detect and manage hypercholesterolemia and other disorders of lipoprotein metabolism. This concern led the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; the American Heart Association; and several other medical organizations to establish the National Cholesterol Education Program. Since its inception, the philosophy of the National Cholesterol Education Program has been to direct its educational programs to both the public and the medical community since there is a strong perception that many physicians are confused by the complex issues surrounding lipoprotein metabolism and clinical manifestations of its derangement.

The majority of continuing medical educational programs created as a result of the intense interest in dyslipoproteinemia and its relation to coronary artery disease have been directed to primary care physicians. The relatively small cadre of physicians interested in research on the mechanisms and management of lipid disorders is found primarily in university medical centers and cannot always meet the growing demand for consultative services when primary care physicians encounter patients with more complex lipoprotein disorders.

About 2 years ago, the AHA formed an ad hoc committee to consider this issue and to make recommendations about possible solutions. The committee confirmed the existence of the problem and recommended the creation of a program to enhance physician expertise in management of lipid disorders. The committee believed that a trained core group of intermediate-level clinical lipid specialists could provide consultations and establish standards of practice for the treatment of these disorders in all communities. The committee recommended the establishment of several strategically located training sites for such specialists.

After receiving a grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Company to fund six training centers, the AHA announced a competition. Over 30 applications of extraordinarily high quality were received and considered by a peer review committee. Six centers were approved for funding and are now open and seeking trainees.

The training program features a common curriculum as well as components unique to each of the centers. Each center will provide in-depth education in pathophysiology, diagnosis, and management of a wide spectrum of lipid disorders to approximately 85 physicians each year. Each trainee will attend a 3- to 5-day intensive on-site course and will be expected to undertake home study. The educational program will involve didactic course material, laboratory experience, nutrition counseling, examination of patients, case study discussions, and practice management seminars under the personal tutelage of a highly qualified faculty of lipid specialists. Because management of lipid disorders frequently requires the involvement of other health care personnel, each physician is encouraged to bring an ancillary staff member, such as a nurse or dietitian, to participate in the training course. Follow-up is an important part of the program.

The six training centers will continue to serve as tertiary referral centers for difficult cases. Telephone and facsimile consultation services are also planned. The centers will serve as or be associated with laboratory referral sites for comparison with local laboratories and provision of lipoprotein tests not yet available in community laboratories. A newsletter and an annual 1-day conference for continuing education of course graduates are also planned.

The centers are located to facilitate interaction between the training programs and their graduates. Centers are located at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston; Johns Hopkins College of Medicine, Baltimore; University of California, San Francisco/Berkeley; University of Iowa, Iowa City; University of Washington, Seattle; and Washington University, St. Louis. The first courses are scheduled for January 1991.

Practicing physicians who wish to serve as lipid consultants should consider this training program. Information and application forms may be obtained from Ms. Eleanor Sanders, Coordinator, AHA/Bristol-Myers Squibb Lipid Disorders Training Centers, American Heart Association, 7320 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231.
J C LaRosa

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