

The changes in MEDLARS training courses: a review of a twenty-year experience
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Introduction

The Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) is the main Italian research institute in the field of public health. Its activities include research, control, training and advising in the interest of public health protection. For over twenty years the ISS, through the Documentation Service, has been the Italian reference centre for MEDLARS (MEDical Literature Analysis Retrieval System), a system developed by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) – USA.

The Documentation Service supports ISS research, providing technical and scientific data through online information searching and retrieval. Among other institutional tasks, it has always organized training and updating courses on NLM databases for health personnel operating in biomedical libraries and information services within the National Health Service.

The purpose of this presentation is to analyze changes in the participants of the training courses over the past twenty years.

Educational activities developed by the ISS Documentation Service

From the beginning of its activity, the ISS Documentation Service, as the Italian MEDLARS Center, assigned passwords to Italian users for accessing MEDLARS online fee-based databases. Since 1997, the NLM's policy of free web access to its databases, through the Internet diffusion of PubMed, contributed to redesigning the duties of MEDLARS Centers worldwide.

After the introduction of PubMed, the Documentation Service has put more emphasis on educational activities; it organizes two training courses per year, one on PubMed and other bibliographic databases, the other on Toxnet and toxicological information available on the Internet. The audience of training courses has changed: it was originally composed mainly by librarians and information specialists, but now it mostly includes personnel working within the National Health Service, Research Institutes and Universities at all levels (physicians, pharmacists, chemists, nurses, etc) (see Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3).

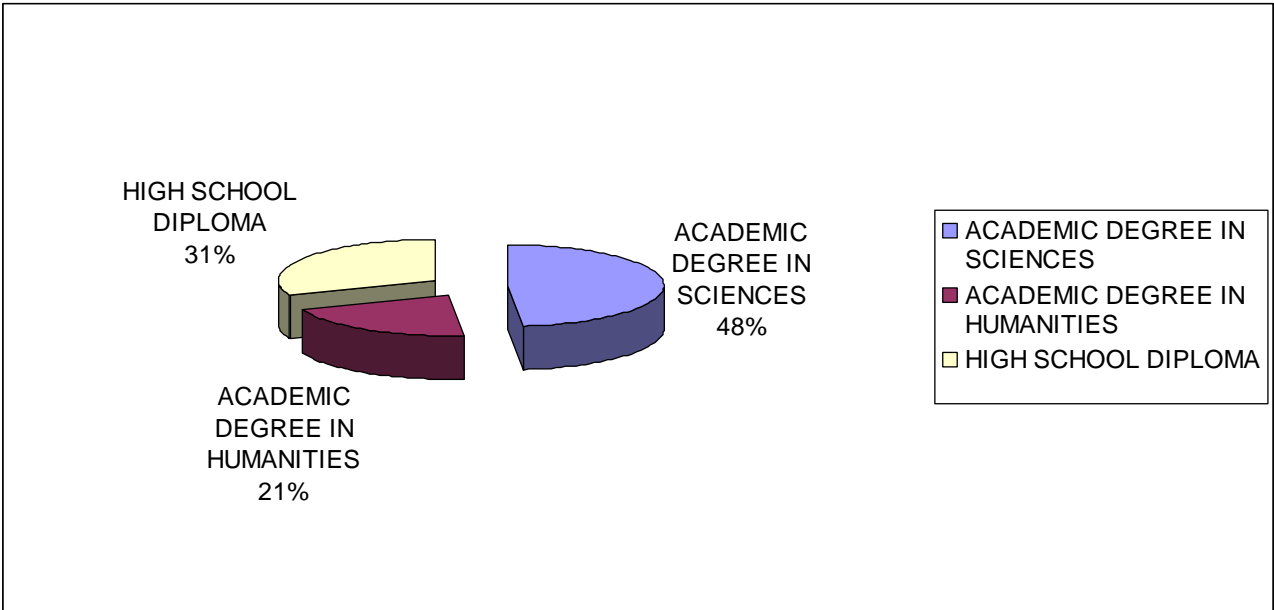


Figure 1. Title of study of training-course participants (1996)

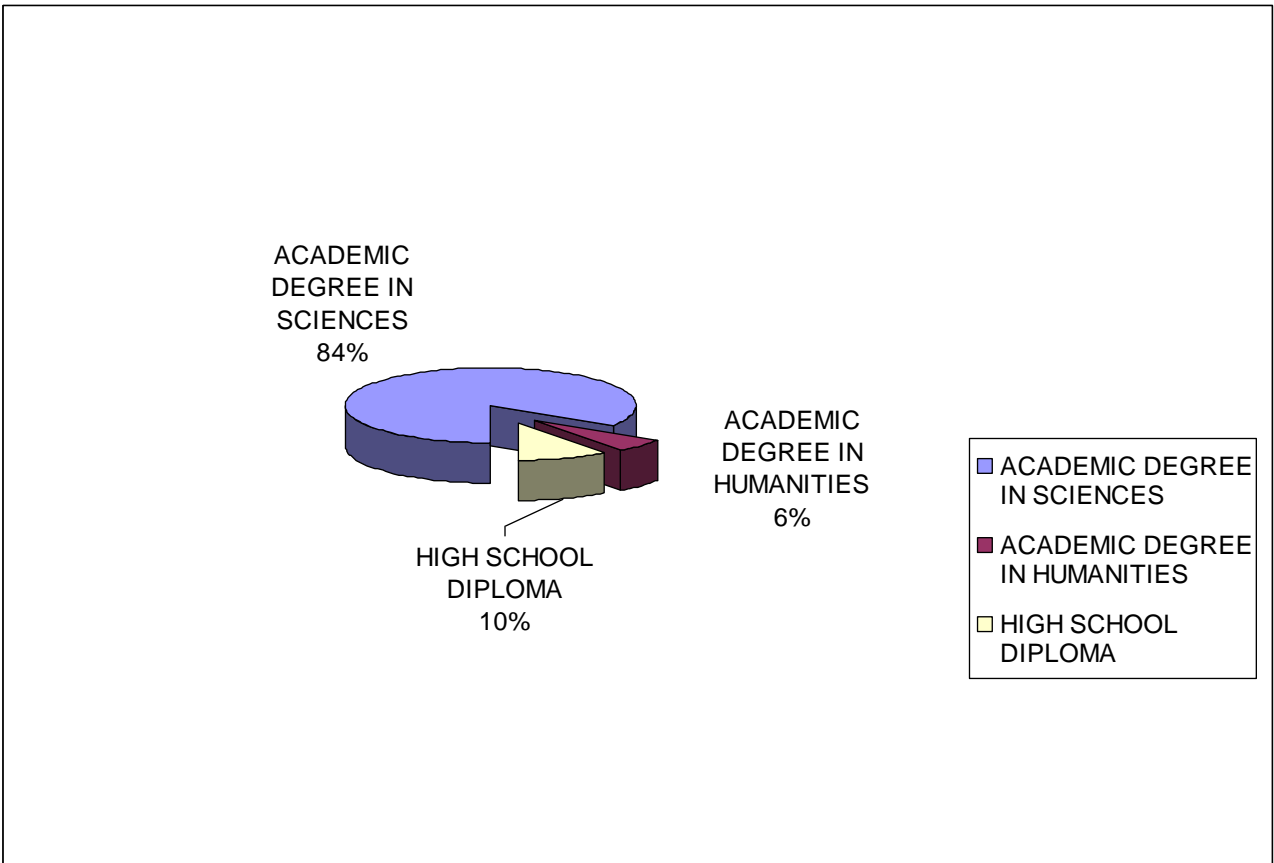


Figure 2. Title of study of training-course participants (2004)

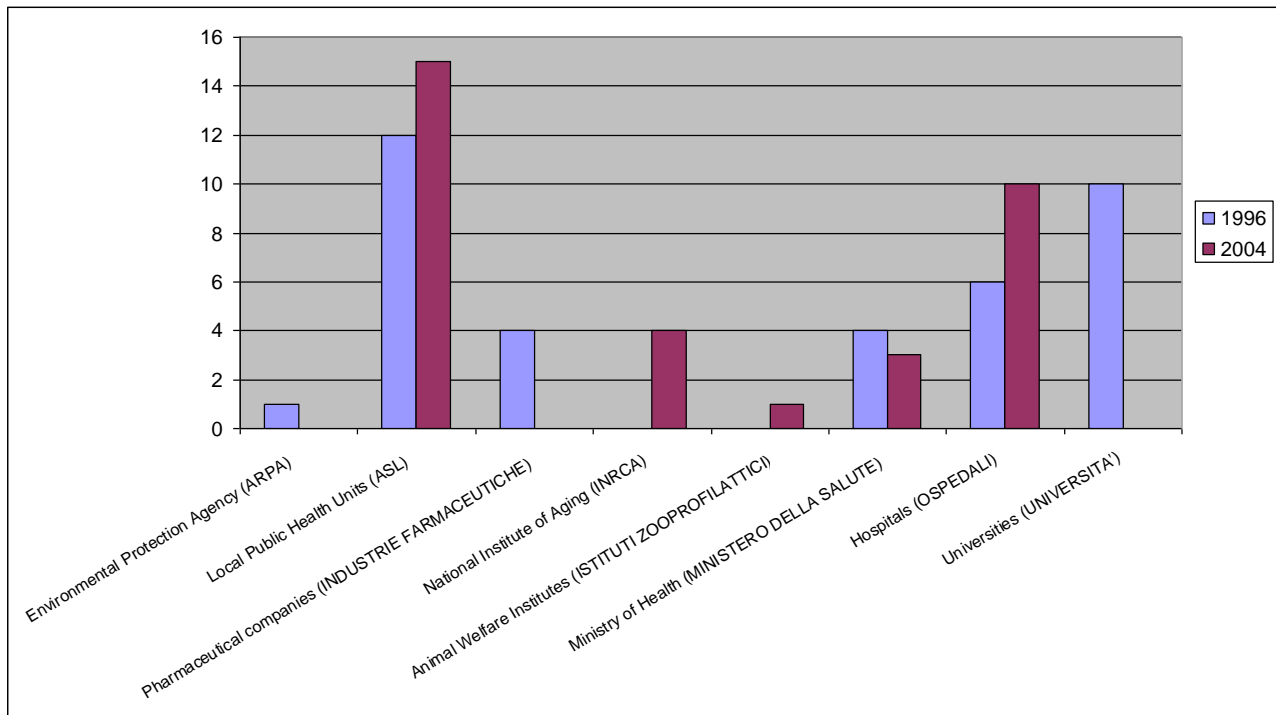


Figure 3. Affiliation of participants

CME in Italy

As many other countries all over the world, Italy has developed a program of Continuing Medical Education (CME) in accordance with the educational objectives set by the Ministry of Health. It includes an organized and reviewed system of training courses and scientific meetings, both theoretical and practical, helping health care professionals to improve their knowledge and skills as practitioners.

The CME mission is double fold. On the one hand, it evaluates educational events (courses, congresses, meetings, etc.) so that physicians, nurses and other health professionals can be granted the quality and usefulness of available events; on the other hand, it is a tool to help health personnel in selecting educational opportunities for their professional development and updating.

Participating in the CEM program is not only an obligation of health professionals, as recalled by the deontological code, but also a right of citizens wishing for careful and aware practitioners. In fact, citizens are ever more aware of the possibilities offered by medicine for prompt and effective answers, not only to treatment demand but also to more general requests in the field of health.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last twenty years the Internet with its technological revolution has deeply affected scientific communication, creating new ways of seeking and exchanging information. The capabilities of information technology to store and deliver a wide range of data across time and distance, at very high rates of speed, have put the global knowledge at the fingertips of everyone owning a personal computer provided with Internet access.

Advances in technologies have been so deep to require also a full redefinition of educational methods. As instructors, we need to regularly update and revise teaching materials, due to the progressive changes of web interfaces. Moreover, electronic teaching materials, presented in Power Point format, have totally replaced the traditional printed texts delivered to the participants of our courses. The high value of computer-based tutorials lies in the possibility for us to easily and rapidly revise them, through the simple deletion of obsolete material and the addition of new ideas.

At the same time, the production of electronically-based tutorials allows us to reduce the costs of education, by saving time, paper and human resources used before to prepare photocopies, and makes information at a mouse click for learners.

Certainly, the latest technological developments have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of educational activities, easing the dissemination of information and the exchange of ideas, as not even predictable only a few years ago.