

Specific Qualifications in Phoniatics: Consequences of Their Abandonment

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To the Editor,

Pursuant to the legislation structuring the Health-Care Professions (Law 44 dated November 21, 2003), the Spanish Government will be able to establish the Specific Training Areas within one or more of the various specialities in the health sciences. The diplomas for Specific Training Areas are official qualifications that are valid throughout Spanish territory and will be issued by the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs; the possession of such a diploma will be a necessary requirement for the express use of the title of specialist with specific qualifications in the area.

It may also be considered as a merit for admission to highly-specialized positions at public or private centres or establishments.

These regulations have been drafted to alleviate the surfeit of qualifications in Europe and in Spain in particular. In view of the multi-disciplinary nature of the areas making up phoniatics and bearing in mind the trend towards making the medical specialization process a core subject, it becomes essential to regulate and attain the level of training in the various existing medical specialities dealing with this area, specifically otorhinolaryngology, rehabilitation and physical medicine.

Through the Phoniatics Commission of the Spanish Otorhinolaryngology Society, after several months of meetings and discussions on the problem, the joint document entitled "Bases for the Creation of the Specific Training Area for Phoniatics" was signed on June 17, 2005 by the representatives of the Spanish Society for Rehabilitation and Physical Medicine (SERMEF), the Spanish Phoniatics Medical Society, and the Spanish Otorhinolaryngology and Neck and Head Pathology Society (SEORL). This document represents the formal agreement between the 3 associations involved and interested in the creation of the specific training area for phoniatics: the SEORL and the SERMEF, as the core specialities on which the area of qualification is based, and the SOMEF as the society grouping together practically all of the phoniaticists working in this medical discipline in Spain.

The said agreement reflects that, once the specific training area for phoniatics has been established and the teaching contents defined along with the conditions for accessing training in this area, it will be necessary to stipulate the necessary criteria so that those physicians who have been

engaged in professional activities in connection with phoniatics may, as an exception and on this sole occasion, attain the diploma corresponding to the phoniatics training area.

At the same time as it regulates the situation of the professionals currently exercising as phoniaticists, it would establish the sole route for qualification of specialists coming from otorhinolaryngology and rehabilitation over a period of 2 years in duly accredited centres, so as to guarantee the future demand for these professionals.

So as to start the necessary proceedings for the creation of the specific training area in phoniatics, this agreement was submitted to the pertinent bodies of the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs in the autumn of 2005, without any news so far that anything is being done in this sense, so there is currently a legal vacuum in our country that is preventing professionals currently practising phoniatics from adequately accrediting their training in the speciality, thus leading to a situation of confusion that fosters the entry into the profession of individuals without appropriate qualifications, even by some from sectors outwith medicine. On the other hand, the lack of progress in the development of the specific training area for phoniatics means that those who wish to obtain such qualifications cannot follow a properly regulated training programme offering the necessary checks on the accreditation of the centre and the doctor being trained. The allocation of phoniatics as a specific training area within otorhinolaryngology would open up more consistent prospects with respect to the status of this sub-speciality, as maintained by the Spanish Otorhinolaryngology Society.

The growth that we are witnessing in economic, cultural and health-care terms has begun to generate a growing demand for medical assistance in the field of this speciality. Modern social conditions are ever more intensely demanding not only good physical health for the reintegration of its members but an acceptable level of functional, mental, and intellectual capacity.

Phoniatics has typically been viewed as a speciality devoted to the treatment of the voice, particularly among singers; that is why it is important to shatter this cliché and call attention to this speciality's dedication to alterations in language, speech, swallowing and hearing (with respect to its involvement in the preceding processes) with just as much relevance as might be given to its care of the voice-related pathologies.

Based on morbidity analyses and taking into account relatively well cared-for countries with wide-ranging practical experience, the International Federation of Oto-Rhino-Laryngological Societies (IFOS), the European Union of Phoniatrists (UEP) and, along the same lines, the Spanish Medical Society for Phoniatics (SOMEF) felt back in 1970 that it was appropriate to create a phoniatics and logopedia unit for every 200 000 inhabitants or one phoniatician for every 10 otorhinolaryngologists.

Social indicators such as the population's lifestyle and education in health matters, the social and cultural level, the attention lavished on childhood, increased awareness of geriatric care and greater life expectancy, on the one hand, and the increase in the figures for cranioencephalic trauma or cerebrovascular accidents, among other factors, are associated with notable rises in the demand for care in pathologies of language and communication, to which dysphagia has recently been added. This obliges us to foresee an increase in the demand for the speciality, already considerable in the last few years, and to review the considerations on the supply and demand of health-care in phoniatic pathology.

Bearing in mind that there were 78 phoniaticians providing medical care activities in Spain during 1995 and that the vocational training schools for phoniatics have ceased to operate while awaiting the creation of the specific training area, it must now be said that we are very far from attaining the coverage levels proposed so long ago by the countries with health-care experience in this field; having regard for these indications, there should be 200 doctors qualified in phoniatics devoted to providing medical care in Spain.

It is paradoxical that, despite having available the training resources needed, an agreement signed between the various specialities involved and the support of the otorhinolaryngologists and physicians devoted to rehabilitation who are interested in receiving training in an area of growing demand, we are currently in a situation of indefinite stand-by.

For all of the reasons given, we can expect, within a more or less short term, to be facing an absolute scarcity of adequately trained professionals to meet the demands posed by society in the area of phoniatics.