Needs Assessment
Guidelines for identifying the needs for a CME activity

Needs assessment can be defined as “any systematic approach to collecting and analyzing information about the educational needs of individuals or organizations.” It is an essential step in the CME planning process so that ultimately CME activities serve to improve outcomes for patients by changing physicians’ practice behaviors.

To achieve this goal, it is of utmost importance to identify what is missing from the optimum practice and what are the actual or potential learning needs of the target audience which can be addressed by providing CME opportunities. Identification of CME needs provide the foundation for the entire educational process. The needs identification process sets the stage for the development of learning objectives (what the participants can expect to get out of the activity) which is then followed by format selection (the best method to deliver content and teach those objectives).

Answers to these questions may help to clarify the need for CME and begin the process of collecting and analyzing information:

- How widespread is the need?
- What sources confirmed this need?
- What are the ramifications to patients if this need is not filled?
- How directly is the need linked to physicians’ practice?
- Will the CME activity improve practice?
- What are the barriers to physicians changing practice behaviors?

Needs assessment sources vary widely but in general, data may come from people, documents and special studies. These sources are commonly classified as follows:

Inferred Needs
New diagnosis, treatment, and practice guidelines, derived from:

- New diagnosis techniques
- New treatment options (new medications or indications)
- New practice guidelines
- New acquired technology or equipment
- Legislative regulatory or organizational changes effecting patient care

Expressed Needs
Generally coming from internal sources such as:

- Requests submitted on participant’s activity evaluation form
- Formal survey of potential participants
- Informal comments
- Consensus of faculty members within a department
• Requests from medical quality assurance departments

Proven Needs
Based on objective external or internal sources, which may come from:

• Epidemiological data
• Quality assurance data
• Morbidity and mortality data
• Guidelines and requirements published by professional societies and other health care organizations or associations
• Journal articles and other scientific publications
• News media
• Published national consensus
• Chart reviews
• Hospital data (such as infection control data)
• Patient satisfactions surveys results

Indicated by Experts

• Expert opinion from practitioners or other knowledgeable sources
• Input from planning committee
• Consensus of faculty members within the department

For CME activities, data from all appropriate sources should be gathered and summarized in a needs assessment section of the Yale CME application.