

Student nurses last resort to save labs

BY GINA STACK

The fight to save labs in first year nursing is now in the hands of students.

Backed up by the university, the Department of Physiology and Biophysics has decided to replace labs in physiology 1010 with tutorials on a trial basis for the next two years.

Physiology 1010 must be taken by all nursing students. Students in all four years of the program fear that losing the labs will not prepare nursing students for a second-year course, pathophysiology.

Doug Gordon, nursing representative on the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU), is one of many nursing students fighting to save the labs.

"The actual labs help pinpoint a couple of different areas that the students have been working on throughout the year and it helps to have something that you can look at and apply...it's not until you actually have a laboratory that some students will say, 'Okay, I see now,'" Gordon said.

"Even though there are only eight labs they are essential to help in the understanding of basic concepts."

Gordon has circulated a petition against the replacement of labs with tutorials. He has received the support of students in all four years of the program and the DSU. He says that the directors of nursing and health and human performance also stand behind what he is doing, and he is in the process of writing a letter to Dalhousie president Tom Traves to explain the situation.

Nursing falls under the Faculty of Health Professions, but physiology falls under the Faculty of Medicine. Nursing students take physiology in the Faculty of Medicine. Because the course is offered outside of the Faculty of Health Professions, the faculty can only influence how the course is taught.

Last year, labs were replaced with tutorials in first-year physiology. The Faculty of Health Professions was unhappy with the change. While still negotiating with the Faculty of Medicine, Health Professions decided to offer the course with labs under a different name, Health 1000, in its own faculty. This was only a temporary solution to the problem, and when the Faculties of Health Professions and Medicine could not agree which faculty should teach the course, and whether labs or tutorials were better, the dispute was taken before Dr. Warwick Kimmins, the acting vice-president academic.

Kimmins said that he was forced to come down like Moses from the mountain to determine the future of the course.

Kimmins said that it was an easy decision to move the course from Health Professions back to Medicine. He said that it just makes more sense, and Dalhousie has a policy of keeping all R-level classes in home departments. He argued that it leads to stronger departments and makes recruiting the best professors easier. He said, for example, that a English professor would be more attracted to Dalhousie if s/he had an opportunity to teach in the English Department, as opposed to History.

Kimmins stood by his decision to replace labs with tutorials against the wishes of the Faculty of Health Professions.

He said his decision was

influenced by the strong backing of the change made by the head of the Department Physiology and Biophysics, Dr. Andrew French.

"I trust the judgement of the person as a professional in his field," said Kimmins, who welcomes experimentation. "No curriculum is stable and I would discourage keeping things the same."

The replacement of labs with tutorials will be re-evaluated in two years.

Dr. Julia Wong teaches pathophysiology, a second year course with physiology 1010 as a prerequisite. Last year, Wong's second-year class did not have labs. Wong says that her students need the labs to be properly prepared for pathophysiology.

"These students are struggling to re-learn normal physiology and at the same time study the physiology mechanisms altered by disease in humans. It seems rather obvious to me that they have not fully understood the fundamental concepts to establish the basic link between the scientific realm of physiology and its application in clinical practice," she said.

Wong said that she has to set up a remedial class for the students, and even then she had to water-down the course so that students could understand. She blames these problems on a lack of labs in first year.

Wong says that she is unhappy with the way French handled the situation.

"I found Dr. French's callous attitude towards student education is disturbing and reprehensible," Wong wrote in a letter to the director of the School of Nursing.

Wong accused French of acting unilaterally, allowing for "no input at all into physiology, and being quiet stubborn and refusing to hear [the nursing] side".

French denies these accusations saying that he is acting in good faith, and the best interest of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics. In making his decision, French presented data from physiology departments across the country determining that about 33 per cent include a lab in for teaching health professions students.

"In replacing laboratories with tutorials, we at Dalhousie are not out

of step with other Canadian universities, in fact we are following a trend that reflects changes in the discipline," he said.

Speaking about the Survey of Physiology Teaching in Canada, French says that there is a trend across Canada to replace labs with tutorials. He added that schools taking part in the survey "concluded that the effects [of eliminating labs] were largely unknown or seemingly minimal". He added that only one out of 11 programs reported a direct negative effect.

"A lack of laboratory teaching was never mentioned as a reason for dissatisfaction [with a school's nursing program]. Of the reasons cited, a lack of direct relevance to the profession was clearly the major complaint. I have heard this complaint before, and feel that it is unjustified."

French insists that he consulted the directors of all programs that would be effected by changes to physiology 1010.

"I am sorry if Dr. McIntyre [Dean of the Faculty of Health Professions] was not personally consulted, or if people other than the program

directors at the time have different opinions, but I really feel that I acted properly and in the best interest of the students."

Dr. Lynn McIntyre, Dean of the Faculty of Health Professions, says that the department did all that it could to save the labs, but there is nothing more that they can do.

"We are very disappointed, but [the faculty] can no longer protest this because we entered into an agreement (arbitration between faculties and v-p academic & research)," McIntyre said.

"We entered into negotiations in good faith and lost. I'm not happy, of course I'm not happy, but we are prohibited from doing anything further by decree. We don't have a choice."

"We don't agree with the decision, but we are bound by it."

The budget to the Department of Physiology has been reduced by nine per cent since 1995. However, French and Kimmins both say that the elimination of first year labs was strictly pedagogical and has nothing to do with budget restraints.

Grad House realities and aftermath

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propose a process for evaluating the problem, they should be willing to entertain a position that they many not [agree with]," Gibson said.

Rob Schurko is a PhD student at Dalhousie. He also voted on Tuesday night, and is outraged by recent developments.

"I am appalled that [the DAGS executive would] resign just because they didn't get their way, absolutely appalled. It's very immature."

The Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) was approached on November 19 by the outgoing DAGS executive to assist DAGS in determining the appropriate steps to take once the resignation came into effect. It was then decided to close the Grad House for the day on November 20.

According to a DSU statement, "The DSU reviewed the relevant constitutions and policies of the involved parties and found that the responsibility for all operations of DAGS is conferred upon the remaining members of the DAGS council. Any further decision concerning DAGS will be those of the remaining councillors."

"My main concern is that DAGS proceeds in a constitutionally and financially responsible manner," said Bridgette McCaig, DSU v-p executive. The DSU is ultimately responsible for all Dalhousie student societies, and it plans to continue monitoring DAGS' activity.

"The ten remaining councillors would like to assure the Dalhousie community that the DAGS will continue to operate in its capacity as a representative body for the Dalhousie graduate

students," DAGS said in a statement released this week. "With regards to the Graduate House, the doors will remain open."

"On Sunday [November 30], there will be a DAGS council meeting," said Malaka Hendela, who had to step down from her position as Treasurer as a result of the resignations, but still retains her position as a councillor. "We will be dealing with all things openly, thoroughly, and clearly."

The reduced DAGS council met informally this past Sunday to discuss its next steps. Both Hendela and Jim Leger, another councillor and former v-p communication, stressed the importance of proceeding in a cautious manner to ensure that proper procedures are followed.

"We met on Sunday just to speak freely to each other and figure out what needs to be done. We didn't make any formal decisions," Leger said.

DAGS was originally going to hold a council meeting this past Sunday, but decided to meet informally instead, postponing the DAGS council meeting to Sunday, November 30. At this meeting, DAGS will also be

receiving a proposal from the Grad House manager concerning house and operations improvements. This meeting is open to all graduate students.

"There is no need to rush into anything. There is some urgency, but it isn't panic situation," Leger said.

According to the DAGS statement, the priorities for the current DAGS council will be to appoint an interim president and executive, organize a by-election to fill the vacant councillor positions and elect a new president, and to coordinate a referendum to amend the DAGS constitution to include a clause which will ensure representation on council from all departmental societies in the future. The DAGS constitution has not been updated since 1979.

"We will eventually be taking action on the decision that was made at the general meeting [to support the 'Grow the Grad House' proposal], but we will leave much of that responsibility, as was recommended in the proposal, to the house manager," Leger said.

"In the meantime, things will continue as normal."

With files from Gina Stack

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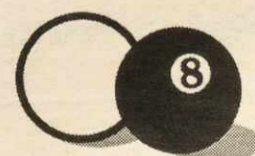
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