

Lifelong health: Physician-led effort focuses on teens

JAN 9, 2017

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Did you know that September was National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month? It was also Sexual Health Awareness Month, and National Suicide Prevention Week also took place in September. Throughout the year, there are many such occasions that relate to issues affecting adolescent health, but there is no similar nationwide event that targets teen health as a whole. Physicians are trying to change that.

The second annual Pennsylvania Teen Health Week takes place this week, kicked off Monday by an event in the state's capital, Harrisburg, to mark Gov. Tom Wolf's proclamation of the occasion. Each day focuses on a major aspect of adolescent health: diet and exercise; violence; mental health; sexual development and health; and substance use and abuse. A toolkit provided to schools explains how Teen Health Week activities can help educators meet state academic standards, and the event comes with its own color, lime green, and Twitter hashtag: #PATeenHealthWeek2017.

Educational posters, question-and-answer sessions with visiting physicians and health professionals, extra-credit assignments and other activities are encouraged. For example, teens—bombed by junk-food ads—are prompted to use their creative skills to mold advertisements that sell the benefits of healthful foods. The state health department, medical schools, county and state medical societies, and health care systems are taking part.

Teen Health Week is designed to counteract “two big misconceptions,” explains founder Laura Offutt, MD, an internist who wound down her career in the pharmaceutical industry to pursue activities related to adolescent health.

“One of these big misconceptions is that, when you talk to teens, they think adults don’t really care about their health,” Dr. Offutt said. “The converse of that is when you talk to adults—not so much in the medical community, but in casual conversations—is that because teens make mistakes, then adults think they must not really care about their own health. This is a week that pulls together teens and adults, both in and outside of health care, to show that this is just so obviously not true, on either end.”

Beyond the birds and bees

That is part of why a comprehensive approach to teen health is needed, Dr. Offutt added.

“Another misconception is that when we say ‘teen health’ we mean only sexual health, and then people go running in the opposite direction,” she said. “But this is about mind-and-body health, preventive health, active treatments—all of that together.”

Dr. Offutt said adolescent health education must consist of more “than a long list of don’ts.” Teens, she said, “are agents of change. If you arm them with a good idea, they can powerfully take that and help their families and communities.” A central aim of Teen Health Week is to help adolescents become more health literate, especially when it comes to discriminating between reliable and questionable information found online.

Michael Della Vecchia, MD, PhD, immediate past president of the Philadelphia County Medical Society, is taking part in Teen Health Week and said the idea could have a big payoff as teens become adults.

“When you have a healthy teen, you have a healthy adult, and you can save a fortune on future health care. It’s a very good investment,” he said. “Also, teens are at the age when you can avoid problems and not just ameliorate them. They can avoid drug abuse, avoid smoking, avoid poor nutrition and all the future problems such behaviors bring.”

Dr. Della Vecchia has been impressed by the enthusiasm for the idea among Pennsylvania teens.

“We were overwhelmed by the response we received,” he said, and felt that it happened because teenagers responded by saying, “You’re addressing me as an individual.”

Dr. Della Vecchia, a delegate to the Pennsylvania Medical Society, helped secure the society’s backing of Teen Health Week in October 2016 at the House of Delegates Conference in Hershey, Pa. As an alternate delegate to the AMA House of Delegates, he proposed a resolution endorsing a nationwide, annual Teen Health Week at the AMA’s 2016 Interim Meeting. The resolution was adopted unanimously. It encourages state and specialty medical associations across the nation to

promote and participate in Teen Health Week, along with relevant government agencies and health care organizations.

For physicians in other states who would like to take up the idea, Dr. Offutt advises that “involvement doesn’t need to be a huge undertaking. I think if everybody did a little bit, that would provide a really loud, unifying message about the importance of adolescent health and for adolescents to learn how to promote their own good health through the course of their lives.”