

Realistic Program for Teens Discourages Drunk Driving

BY RHODA WEISS

Earlier this year, two 16-year-olds injured in a drunk-driving accident near their high school were taken to Scripps Mercy Hospital in San Diego—one by Mercy Air, the hospital's helicopter service, and the other by ambulance. Once inside the trauma room, physicians and nurses tried valiantly to save their lives. When the victims' parents arrived at Mercy, they experienced the tragedy of suddenly losing a child in a senseless accident.

Fortunately for all those involved, this event was only a demonstration—not a real-life tragedy. What is real is that every day in the United States, 50 people are killed in alcohol-related vehicular accidents. These accidents are the leading cause of death among teenagers. Nationally, 16-year-olds have the highest rate of involvement in fatal automobile accidents per miles driven. Although teens constitute only 6.3 percent of California's population, they account for 13 percent of motor vehicle-related deaths and injuries.*

In the early 1990s, every 15 minutes someone in the United States died in an alcohol-related traffic collision. However, with the implementation of new laws and the efforts of grassroots organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), the death rate is now one every 30 minutes—lower, but still an unacceptable figure.

Scripps Mercy is trying to lower those statistics even more through its leadership of a two-day program intended to educate high school juniors and seniors about the perils of drinking and driving. Offered throughout the year at a number of local schools, the program, entitled "Every 15 Minutes," challenges high school students to think about drinking and driving, teaches them how to make mature decisions, and stresses the impact a poor decision can have on family, friends, and their own future.

"Every 15 Minutes' is so effective because it



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involves friends and classmates in a realistic and dramatic re-enactment," says Tom Gammieri, Scripps Mercy's administrator. "By partnering with several community organizations, immersing teens in the program, and taking it to where they live, 'Every 15 Minutes' makes the consequences of drinking and driving up-close and personal in a way teens can understand." "Every 15 Minutes" is also sponsored by the San Diego County Police and Sheriff's departments in conjunction with the state's Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control.

Before the program, approximately 25 students and their parents, representing a cross-section of the school, are selected to participate in each two-day program. All participants sign waivers releasing the program sponsors from responsibility in case a participant is injured. On the morning of the first day, a drunk-driving collision is staged near the school. Emergency services personnel respond to treat student participants, all of whom are made up to look like injured accident victims. The county Medical Examiner's Office handles "fatalities" at the scene, whereas local fire department personnel extract "injured" students from the vehicle. The city's traffic police investigate the collision and arrest the student "drunk driver." Student participants are actually taken to Scripps Mercy Hospital Trauma Unit, where doctors simulate attempts to save their lives. Pretending to be unable to do so, the doctors "notify" the parents of their child's untimely "death." Organ procurement team members discuss the option of organ donation with the parents. Meanwhile, students who "die" on-scene are taken to a local mortuary, where they wait for family members to arrive and identify them. The "drunk driver" is transported to the county jail and is charged.

Back at school, someone dressed as the "Grim Reaper" removes selected students from class every 15 minutes. These students are taken to an area where they are made up to resemble a dead person. A uniformed deputy sheriff and a counselor escort each "dead" student back to class; the sher-

*All statistics from the California Bureau of Highway Safety.

iff reads the student's "obituary" to classmates. The poster-sized obituaries, which include photographs, are composed by the students' parents and are displayed in the classroom for the remainder of the year. From the moment the student is placed back into class, he or she is not allowed to interact with other students or staff (but is allowed to continue his or her class schedule). Meanwhile, the student's parents receive a mock death notification from a deputy sheriff, either at their homes or places of employment. All events are videotaped and shown during the "Every 15 Minutes" assembly on the second day of the program.

"Although the death notifications are simulated—and everyone knows this—the notifications typically result in overwhelming displays of emotion and concern," says Chris Van Gorder, president and CEO of the Scripps Health system and himself a former police officer.

The first day's activities also include a court trial of the "accused," a visit to the juvenile detention center and the morgue, and even a "funeral." At the end of the day, the "dead" students are taken to local lodging for an overnight retreat in order to effectively simulate the fact that the students are "gone." The students have no contact with family or friends until the end of the second day's assembly. Typically, the retreat is the turning point of the program.

"During the day, the students are filled with adrenaline and full of excitement. At the retreat, the focus shifts," explains Michael Sise, MD, Scripps Mercy's Trauma Services director. "The tone for the program is set as students participate in 'trust activities' with counselors from the local school district's counseling team, the sheriff's department, the fire department, MADD, and others. They also get involved in team-building activities such as a relay race, 'trust walk,' 'pledge wall,' and other selected exercises. Students hear first-hand from speakers as they share stories of alcohol-related tragedies and remind students to recognize the seriousness of poor choices."

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ters to their parents telling them all the things they'd liked to have said before making the choice to misuse the alcohol that took their lives. Parents also write letters to their children and share them the following day when students and parents are reunited at a school assembly."

"The day two assembly is typically the most emotional and influential component of the 'Every 15 Minutes' program," says Charles Simmons, MD, Scripps Mercy's Emergency Services director. As the students enter, they see a casket representing the classmates who 'died' in the traffic accident. At the assembly, the previous day's events are highlighted in an edited video presentation in which students see how the choices they made affect others."

Local emergency response teams, law enforcement, school staff, parents, and guest speakers share how real alcohol-related collisions have affected their lives. A San Diego police officer, himself a victim of a drunk driver, is also a featured speaker along with a member of the local MADD chapter. "Dead" students and parents are reunited for the first time since becoming the "accident" victims and read the letters they have written to each other.

"The last and most critical item impressed upon everyone is the importance of acknowledging that alcohol doesn't hurt just those who drink; too often the innocent are also victims," says Van Gorder. "Throughout the program, teenagers are constantly reminded about the dangers of drinking and driving. They know the statistics, but many teens share the belief that it will never happen to them. The students are challenged to make sound choices and decisions as they enter adulthood."

By the end of this school year, Scripps Mercy, Scripps La Jolla, and Scripps Encinitas hospitals expect to have reached approximately 10,000 students with the "Every 15 Minutes" program.

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