

PROFILE

TIMKEN MERCY MEDICAL CENTER

Teaching Teens Life-affirming Values

Although most persons would acknowledge that premarital sex and substance abuse pose significant threats to adolescents' health and well-being, few adults grasp how pervasive the threats are. At Timken Mercy Medical Center, Canton, OH, one employee's disturbing experience led to the creation of the Teen Issues Forum, a program initiated in 1993 to educate young teenagers from area Catholic schools about the potential consequences of alcohol and drug abuse and teen pregnancy.

THE CATALYST

When Ray Fete, Timken Mercy's director of development, learned that a girl he had coached the year before had become pregnant, he decided to have a frank discussion about premarital sex with his grade school girls basketball team. As the talk proceeded, Ray was shocked to realize that some of the girls were already sexually active.

Troubled, Ray shared his concern with co-workers at Timken Mercy. He eventually approached me to discuss what the medical

center might do to meet some of the health and wellness, as well as the spiritual and moral, needs of young teenagers in the Canton area.

TEEN ISSUES FORUM

In reviewing available community resources, we realized that no one offered a program that

Observers were amazed by the amount of misinformation students were operating under.

addressed all these issues at once. Moreover, no program addressed them from a Catholic point of view. To fill this void, we decided to launch Teen Issues Forum as a pilot program for Catholic schools in our service area.

Our first tasks were to decide which issues to address, what grade level to target, and how to present the program. Rather than spending months doing a community needs assessment, we decided to trust our instincts as to the topics we should focus on. Teen sex and

the related issue of sexually transmitted disease and early pregnancy were at the top of our "must do" list. Alcohol and drug abuse and its relationship to motor vehicle operation and ridership were next on our list.

We also realized that overwhelming media and peer pressure would make it difficult to reach our audience. Speakers would have to be knowledgeable, of course, but they would also have to be interesting and able to relate well with young people.

Finally, we decided that selected groups of eighth graders would work best as a target audience because they were still young enough to be receptive but mature enough for a frank discussion of the issues. Moreover, as the oldest students at their schools, they could take the message back to their peers and younger schoolmates. The goal was that students selected to the program be treated as special by Timken Mercy, school faculty and administrators, and other students.

THE PILOT PROGRAM

The three Canton-area Catholic schools we

invited agreed to participate in the program. Students filled out an application form, signed by their parents, that clearly explained the subject matter to be covered and the frank manner of presentation. Each school sent seven students to the program, which was conducted on three consecutive Tuesday afternoons.

Session one dealt with communicable diseases, with emphasis on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The presenter, a Timken Mercy epidemiologist, emphasized that abstinence was the only totally effective means of preventing STDs. An accompanying video addressed some of the social implications of contracting STDs. In the discussion session that followed, stu-

dents asked a number of explicit questions. Observers from Timken Mercy were amazed by the amount of misinformation students were operating under.

The second session focused on premarital sex and teen pregnancy. Ray, who volunteered to lead the discussion after our scheduled presenter canceled, dealt first with medical problems associated with teen pregnancies and then turned to the real-life difficulties of being a teen parent. After Ray's presentation, the students toured the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, where a Timken Mercy neonatologist explained the difficulties often affecting infants born to teens.

The groups then returned to the class-

Timken Mercy Medical Center has developed lesson plans and related materials for the Teen Issues Forum. Anyone interested in receiving them can call at 216-489-1001 or write:

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room for a discussion of premarital teen sex. The discussion brought out social, personal, moral, and religious reasons for teens to abstain from sex.

In the final session, we focused on driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Students visited the emergency department, where a nurse conducted a brief tour and discussed the medical impact of drugs and alcohol. Students then viewed a videotape that simulated an actual accident involving two local teens who had been drinking and driving. At the film's conclusion, the mother of one of the teenagers who had died in the accident spoke of the impact on her and her family.

In the ensuing discussion the facilitator pointed out that death was only one of the potential consequences of drinking and driving. Others included living with the guilt of causing the death of a friend or being disabled.

PLANNING AHEAD

The Teen Issues Forum was such a success that teachers from our pilot schools asked if we could present the same material in a session for them. In addition, a survey indicated that teachers from other area Catholic schools would be interested in a program

for teachers as well.

In response, we now conduct a day-long program for teachers, with an introductory segment focusing on

The program is designed to be flexible to meet the needs of our young people.

their needs. Following this segment, the teachers participate in the same programs delivered to the students, with the time allotted for students' questions devoted instead to discussing the best methods of conveying the information in the classroom. We can now offer continuing education credits through the Catholic Diocese Department of Education and have been approved by the state to award continuing education units (CEUs) for the program.

After reassessing the Teen Issues Forum itself, we decided to add a segment on teen suicide and the overriding issue of self-esteem, having found that students often turn to drugs and sex to gain acceptance from their peers. The self-esteem segment promotes students' sense of well-being and emphasizes the importance of doing what is

best for one's self.

As we enter the second year of our program, we have also decided to alter the format by offering the program as a single, day-long event. The advantages of this change are that it reduces transportation needs and allows us to build a stronger spirit of camaraderie among participants. The program is designed to be flexible, changing from year to year to meet the needs of our young people. This year we plan to evaluate the need to discuss firearms safety and gang-related issues.

OUR HOPE

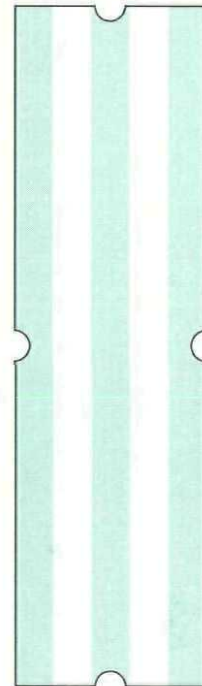
We hope ultimately to reach every student and teacher in our service area's Catholic schools. Although Catholic students make up only a small percentage of the overall school population, we believe progress in this area is worth the effort. As the area's most prominent Catholic institution, Timken Mercy has a responsibility to promote Catholic values and supply accurate information to our children.

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