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NEWS

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* * * * * Preventive Cardiology Project
makes freshmen medical students
objects of study.

DALLAS--Preventive medicine? "It's always lacked sex appeal," says Dr. Norman Kaplan, recognized authority on hypertension and professor of internal medicine at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

That is, until now.

Kaplan is principal investigator of an innovative five-year Preventive Cardiology Project for teaching freshmen students the risks underlying heart disease. He has chosen freshman students for the project because "they are more open-minded and receptive."

"As they remain in medical school and become involved in crisis medicine, they get progressively turned off with nutrition, weight control, stress and other risk factors of heart disease," he says.

"After all, when you have a critically ill patient with an acute myocardial infarction (a heart attack), it's never a problem getting enthusiasm from medical students or house staff.

"But disease prevention is boring. Physicians don't get gratification from it--they don't feel like they're accomplishing anything."

The answer? "Get the students actively involved. Let them become the objects of the study," says Kaplan.

This year, the second year of the study, freshmen are being offered nutritious lunches twice a month, special groups on stress management and smoking cessation, exercise and jogging programs, first-hand accounts given by victims of heart disease, along with seminars on correlations between certain lifestyles and cardiovascular disease. All of this is to encourage the future doctors to practice as well as preach about the prevention of heart attacks and strokes.

The project is being funded by an academic award from the National Institutes of Health. There are eleven similar projects going on around the country, but Dr. Kaplan is convinced that Southwestern's is the most imaginative.

Another aspect of the study involves testing the physical condition of the students--testing blood pressure, taking blood samples, measuring body fat and otherwise gathering data about their physical fitness at both the beginning and the end of the year.

Last year's freshman group represented the study's control group. "I just knew they were all going to seed, but they didn't," said Dr. Kaplan of last year's freshman class.

first add preventive cardiology

Measurements taken last year in September and again in May showed the students were little affected by the year's stress. Only six percent smoked, none had high blood pressure, only about four percent had a high level of cholesterol and on the average they only gained two pounds during the school year.

Dr. Steve Lewis, an exercise physiologist at Southwestern and a member of the project's team of investigators, says that this year the researchers are "intervening" in the lifestyles of the students. They hope to change diets for the better, reduce stress, stop smoking and encourage loss of weight when needed. In his area, the researchers want to get each student involved in an exercise program. "Inactivity," he says, "is an important risk factor in heart disease."

"We've developed an exercise system based on known values of energy expenditure," says Lewis. Students will get "fitness points" for participation in activities--running, walking, cycling, swimming, tennis, basketball and several others--depending on the intensity, frequency and duration of the activity. As further inducement for exercise and as an effort to create an element of competition, prizes will be awarded.

Dietary management, an area under the direction of nutrition and dietetics associate professor Norma Berry, will include lunches with food provided by local distributors, such as Beyerly Foods, Inc. and American Dietary Products, a division of American Hospital Supply Corporation. Freshmen will be offered the lunches twice a month and the menus will be planned around foods which are low in cholesterol, calories, salt content and fat. Also, some foods in the school cafeteria will be labeled as to their nutrient content as an aid in making wise daily food choices.

Stress management information will be provided by two members of the medical school's division of psychology, Drs. Kenneth Price and Robert Dain. Price explains that some researchers claim there is a type of behavior in people which increases the likelihood of developing coronary artery disease. This is the "A" type personality. And there is a "B" behavioral type which is presumably resistant to developing heart disease. Psychological testing will be done on the freshmen students to see how they are grouped among the A and B classifications, and instruction in relaxation methods and other stress management techniques will be offered to those who feel stress more profoundly.

Price says the A personality is characteristic of a person who always has feelings of time urgency--people who think they have a lot to do while feeling there isn't time in which to accomplish everything. This is the person who tries to do many things at once, such as watching television while reading and eating dinner and talking to one's spouse. This is also the type person who finishes other people's sentences for them.

The B behavioral pattern is the opposite. This is the person who does not feel time pressure and who can take a vacation without feeling guilty or taking work along with them.

Men are sometimes more prone to become A's, says Price. And he adds that he expected most of the freshmen medical students tested last year to test out as A behavioral types. Instead the students were evenly distributed among the A and B classifications.

This year's students will no doubt offer more interesting statistics to add to the cardiology study.

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