

News

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****UT Southwestern sickle cell health-management team helps patients, physicians.

DALLAS--George Buchanan and Mark Swanson are doctors who worry a lot about children. Now the two are leading a team of other health professionals in an educational and service program to help parents of children with sickle cell anemia in Northeast Texas. Buchanan, a professor of pediatrics, heads the pediatric oncology/hematology program at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas. Swanson, an assistant professor of pediatrics, heads the University Affiliated Center at Southwestern.

The UT Southwestern Sickle Cell Case Management Program, funded by the Texas Department of Health, will offer information to the families of sickle cell patients in Northeast Texas. The team doctors will give educational presentations to groups of parents, physicians and health personnel. There will also be a research component to the program that looks at morbidity and mortality.

The program will begin with the parents of infants through five-year-olds and later be expanded to parents of older children, teens and young adults up to 21.

Counties targeted by the program are Anderson, Bowie, Camp, Cass, Cherokee, Delta, Franklin, Gregg, Harrison, Henderson, Hopkins, Lamar, Marion, Morris, Panola, Rains, Red River, Rush, Smith, Titus, Upshaw, Van Zandt and Wood.

Sickle cell anemia is a genetically transmitted chronic blood disorder that primarily affects people of African descent. About one American black in 10 carries the sickle cell trait and can transmit it to the next generation. The condition affects one in 400 black newborn infants. The disease can be deadly as well as devastating to children who inherit the trait from both parents. It is necessary for both parents to be carriers of the sickle cell trait for the child to develop sickle cell anemia.

The "sickled" cells cannot function as normal red blood cells, and the patients show signs of anemia, Buchanan says. Even more dangerous is the fact that these cells stick together and block the normal flow of blood in the small veins. These blockages cause pain in the abdomen, chest, arms and legs in what is called a "sickle-cell crisis."

The blockage also can cause extensive damage to internal organs by depriving them of normal blood flow. One of the organs often damaged is the spleen. Its function is to filter the blood. As a result, young children with sickle cell anemia have a high risk of fatal blood poisoning unless they regularly take penicillin.

"Children with sickle cell disease who live in the North Texas area near UT Southwestern are fortunate because they have the resources of the university and of the sickle cell clinic at Children's Medical Center to call on," Buchanan said. "Through the clinic my associates and I have the chance to talk with parents on a one-to-one basis. The hospital's social workers and the specially trained nurse practitioners also do a great deal of teaching."

These parents--and the older children and teens as well--have the opportunity to learn how to look for early signs of crisis, the importance of preventive health care on a daily basis and what special resources are available in their communities. This knowledge not only helps the sickle cell patient but makes their physicians' job easier in caring for them. Now parents of Northeast Texas

(More)

children with sickle cell anemia will receive special help from UT health professionals, also.

While most sickle cell patients in Northeast Texas are receiving medical care, their physicians may not have enough time or resources to meet all the medical, educational and psychosocial needs of children and families with this complicated and often deadly disease. That's where the Southwestern team can help.

"Too many people think of patient education as simply giving patients information to satisfy their curiosity. What we really need to give them is information to help them prevent fatal complications and other problems," said Buchanan. In addition, they need to know about resources such as transportation and financial help through Texas' Chronically Ill and Disabled Children's Program.

Working with Buchanan and Swanson on this project are social worker Bessie Weed and pediatric nurse Kathi J. Simpson. Weed will be working out of the Dallas office and Simpson attached to the Northeast Texas program office, located in Tyler.

Weed explained that while sickle cell anemia cannot be cured, careful management of the disease, which includes regular use of penicillin, can lead to a better life for the affected children." She and Simpson will be working with parents to coordinate care and find resources when needed.

The team, including the physicians, will be available to consult with personal physicians of the young sickle cell patients as well as giving medical presentations on the disease and its treatment to interested groups in the area. A study is planned over a three-year period on the sickle cell case management program.

For further information call the UT Southwestern Sickle-Cell Case Management Program at 214/688-7117 in Dallas or 214/592-6783 in Tyler.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.