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# News

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\* \* \* \* \* UTHSCD helps teens to find a better way to learn about sex.

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DALLAS--Where do teen-agers get their information on sex? Unfortunately, as anyone who works with teen-agers knows, it's too often from other teen-agers.

The problem is that most of the time they don't know what they're talking about. That's why educating teen-agers to educate their friends, an approach called "peer counseling," is a major part of a new community education program being sponsored by The Division of Maternal Health and Family Planning at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

A major part of the peer counselor education is dispelling sexual myths which commonly get passed on from teen to teen--and sometimes from adult to adult. "Is it true that...?" began many of the teen-agers' questions at the first session. The end of that often repeated sentence ranged from the old ones about masturbation's making hair grow on the palms of your hands or going blind, to females not becoming pregnant if they have sexual relations standing up. Then there's the really traditional myth about catching sexually transmitted diseases from toilet seats. Not only are the myths dispelled in the sessions, but correct information is given in their place.

The educational program, which includes making literature, speakers and other public information available on all areas of health that involve the reproductive system, is funded by a grant from the Department of Health and Education. Kaye Spencer is director of the program, and Cassie M. Patterson is assistant director. Both are social workers at Family Planning.

More than half a dozen high school students from Dallas area schools are currently enrolled in classes to learn about the human body, its reproductive system, preventive health practices, sexually transmitted diseases and human relations. The classes bring together young people who are leaders in different areas of their communities who will make themselves available as sources of information to other young people. At a later date they will also be involved with the project's speakers' bureau, which is currently composed of family planning professionals and informed adult volunteers.

The trainees take examinations on the material covered, receive literature to keep in their own personal files and participate in discussions during training sessions. In addition, each will do a short internship at a Family Planning clinic.

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Also, working with the program is teen counselor Truman Thomas, social worker at the Pinkston Clinic, an adolescent medicine project of the Department of Pediatrics at The University of Texas Health Science Center. The Pinkston Clinic is a part of the Dallas Children and Youth Project.

Thomas, who has been involved in youth work more than a dozen years, believes that helping teens to see themselves in the future and set long-range goals for themselves is an important part of a young person's education, sexual or otherwise. He will be working with the peer counselor trainees in value clarification.

"It is important to remember," says Spencer, "that the purpose of the program is not to seek more clients for Family Planning services, but to see that young people receive correct information about health and reproduction. The young people we have brought together for our first group are not clinic patients, but community volunteers who have been hand-picked for this role because of their ability to relate to others, the trust they have earned with their friends and schoolmates and the relationships they have with their parents."

All the parents are aware of the purpose and content of the program, have seen the teaching materials and "are very supportive of the effort."

The health agency, which has six clinics throughout Dallas and sees more than 40,000 clients a year, will train other sets of peer counselors under the terms of the grant. In addition, counselors will offer consultant services as well as train peer counselors for other agencies. Requests already are being received for additional sessions, including one from a group of Family Planning employees who would like their own children to receive peer counselor training.

Besides learning physiology and other facts related to sex, says Patterson, an emphasis will be put on where teens can go for information, not just contraception.

"People tend to think of agencies like Family Planning as only a place to go for birth control pills. That's not what it is at all. We are involved in the broad spectrum of reproductive choices, including giving pregnancy tests, help with women's health care problems, working with infertility problems and cancer screening. In fact, visits to Family Planning are the major way in which cancer in Dallas women, who do not have regular physicians, is detected."

For further information contact Spencer or Patterson at 214; 688-2938 or write Community Education Program/Family Planning/UTHSCD/ 5323 Harry Hines/Dallas, TX 75235.