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Health education made easier

Student creates program to better inform patients

By Paul Neale
The Battalion

Emily Downward doesn't believe in telling patients to take two aspirin and call her in the morning.

Downward, a community health education major, developed a patient education program to pick up where she believes doctors sometimes leave off.

She interned this semester at Health for All, Inc., a Bryan clinic that provides free medical care and medicine to children and adults who do not have any insurance.

"A lot of times, the doctors just say you have high blood pressure, you've got to take this medication every day for the rest of your life, and they (doctors) never tell them what it is," Downward said. "I give them a definition and tell them they have to watch their diet, exercise, and take their medication; and we talk about each of those things."



Kyle Burnett/The Battalion

Emily Downward has implemented a health education program during her internship at Health for All, Inc. Downward's program helps patients to understand their illnesses and treatments.

Health for All executive director Cindy Patrick said she had been looking for a way to include more interaction with patients.

"Most of the people she talks to say that no one's ever talked to them before about their condition," Patrick said.

Health for All has designated this week to turn its attention toward the children of the Brazos Valley who visit the free clinic. The Children's Miracle Network has given money and area clinics have donated dental hygiene products and bars of soap.

Downward has planned games, such as pin the tail on the cow and a concentration game involving the food groups, to educate the kids about dental care, exercise, nutrition and hygiene.

"With children, you have to educate them while doing something fun," said Downward, who is heading the effort.

She said many of the health problems she comes in contact with can be minimized by education.

"It's really simple stuff like hygiene. Basic information isn't getting out to people who need it," she said. "I just want to help those people and make the information available to them where they can understand it."

Downward developed the patient education program by researching last year's patient sign-in sheets. After entering the data into a computer, she assessed the seven most frequent causes for visits to the clinic and collected educational pamphlets about the various problems.

She then designed a counseling program for each of the seven ailments to deal with patients on an individual basis.

Downward charted the progress of meetings, noting the frequency and reason of patients' visits.

Both Downward and Patrick said they have witnessed a positive impact left by the patient education program.

"I talked to them about how they've changed their diet," Downward said. "All of my patients so far have lost weight. It's really encouraging."

And Patrick said some patients come to the clinic specifically for counseling.

Downward has evaluated her patient education program since its implementation. She said the patients would have liked to spend more time one-on-one, and some planned to bring health-related questions with them on future visits.

"I got really good feedback. We know they

liked it," Downward said.

The program developed by Downward emphasizes the value of internship programs, part of education, Patrick said.

"It's not good that interns don't get paid at the same time, for those of us who can't anybody, we would not have this program wasn't for the internship," Patrick said.

Downward agreed that her experience has been rewarding.

"It's really been good because you can take everything you've learned into practice," Downward said.

The non-paid internship fulfills her last semester's requirement of 500 working hours lasting 13 weeks.

Downward said her program emphasizes basic principles behind health education.

"Health education tries to prevent illness instead of treating them after the fact," Downward said. "It's to take what you have and make the most of it."

Although Downward will be graduating in May, Patrick believes the program has a long ahead of it.

"Emily laid the basis, now we can expand what she did," Patrick said.

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Child

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consider how many people want a baby so bad and are financially and emotionally ready," she said. "These are people who have actively chosen parenthood and are prepared to suffer for it."

Jerri has undergone at least five different fertility treatments. Some, she said, alter your hormones and make your moods swing violently while others give you severe hot flashes.

Each failed effort is a phenomenal disappointment.

"Every time it is like a death, like actually losing a child," she said. "I grieve a death every month."

After many such disappointments, Jerri found herself with a huge amount of anger and sadness and no outlet.

"I prayed to God one night to help me find a place for this anger," she said. "The next day I just began drawing cartoons of my experiences."

Jerri has started a cartoon book playing on the frustrations and tribulations of infertile couples.

Her support group has given her beginning drawings have results.

"My friends love them," she said. "They can relate to so many of the situations."

"There are so many things people who are not infertile do not understand," she said. "Nothing is private anymore, especially not your sex life."

Jerri said once people know you are unable to get pregnant, suddenly everyone's a doctor.

"People tell me it's all in my head, 'just relax,' they say, 'if you stop worrying you'll get pregnant,'" she said. "Or 'stand on your head after you and your husband have sex.'"

Comments like these, Jerri said, become tiresome and frustrating.

"Everyone thinks the 'trying' is the fun part. But it's not fun having sex on demand. It can make your mate feel like a trained seal," she said.

But Jerri's frustration has become inspiration and fueled her creative energy into making her



An example of Jerri's cartoons shows one aspect of an infertile couple's struggle to have a child. Jerri said she draws cartoons to keep her frustration in check.

cartoons.

"You can't make it through this without a good sense of humor," she said. "You have got to laugh at life or you won't survive."

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