

Addressing pregnancy, STDs with interactive program

January 31 2011, By Amy Johns

Teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted disease (STD) are major public health issues in West Virginia. A West Virginia University faculty physician helped develop an interactive program that educates teenaged girls by illustrating the choices available in risky situations. It will be put to use in five West Virginia counties this year, thanks to a \$7.4 million dollar grant from the U.S. Health and Human Services' Office of Adolescent Health.

“What Could You Do?” is a theory-based interactive STD education video that was designed to go beyond traditional sex education methods by presenting typical young women in situations where the “right” paths aren’t always clear. WVU Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine Professor Pamela J. Murray, M.D. M.H.P., worked with a multidisciplinary team led by Julie Downs, Ph.D., and Baruch Fischhoff, Ph.D., of Carnegie Mellon University, to develop the original version of “What Could You Do?” in the 1990s. The video has been shown to increase abstinence, prevent condom failure and reduce reported STD diagnosis.

“There are a number of different components to it,” Dr. Murray said. “In the first part, you meet a group of young women who are sitting around talking about boyfriends and going for checkups for STDs, and then you get to pick a character and follow her story.”

When each storyline comes to a point where a critical decision has to be made, viewers choose from a handful of possible actions. In one scenario, a girl kissing a boy at a party is asked to go somewhere where

the two can be alone. The viewer can opt for the girl to go with the boy, decide to leave the party or go spend time with another friend at the same party. Murray said that while developing the program, researchers learned the variety of potential actions doesn't always occur to young women actually in the moment.

“In checking the original concepts with young women, part of the feedback was that they didn't really see many choices. They felt that once they were alone with a guy, sex was inevitable,” Murray said. “We programmed the intervention so the viewers had to stay on screens where they were asked to examine different choices as if they were in the situation. We made them realistic, and even if you picked the low-risk choice, you still have to continue with the story and examine additional scenes and choices.”

The project is part of a large federal initiative to test evidence-based programs in clinical settings. Participants (14-19 year old females) will be followed for 18 months to see if watching the intervention decreases rates of pregnancy, and chlamydia and gonorrhea infections.

Changes in technology led to the need to update the program. In addition to funding content updates, the HHS grant will make the program available to a far wider audience on DVD and the internet. The updated version will be used by agencies in both rural and urban areas, including: Boone, Braxton, Harrison, Mercer and Randolph counties in West Virginia; Uniontown, Washington, Aliquippa and Pittsburgh, Pa.; and Columbus, Ohio.

Provided by West Virginia University

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