



“Talk to Your Doc” Helping Adolescents Make Health Care Transitions

ANGELA TOWLE, BILL GODOLPHIN, SAMANTHA VAN STAALDUINEN AND VALERIE OVERGAARD

Adolescents are in the paradoxical position of having more questions about themselves and their health than at any other time in their lives, yet less confidence to ask such questions. Research shows that adolescents have difficulties in communicating with physicians and making the transition from seeing the physician with their parents to an independent relationship. Most adolescents say that even if they wanted to discuss sensitive issues such as birth control, STDs, substance use or mental health problems with their physicians, they probably wouldn't. The major barriers to talking about these kinds of topics are embarrassment and worry that the physician will tell parents about the discussion. For the most part, adolescents have a poor understanding about their physicians as a source of confidential care, despite considering them a major source of health information. How might we bridge this gap and help our youth better navigate the twists and turns of the road to healthy adulthood? “Talk to Your Doc” aims to provide an answer.

“Talk to Your Doc” is an outreach project of the University of British Columbia medical school, created by medical students to help high school students develop independent, active and more satisfying doctor-patient relationships. In partnership with the Vancouver School Board, and with start-up funding from The Hamber Foundation, the idea began as a small project and developed into an annual workshop program, first incorporated into the Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) classes of Grade 11 and 12 students and now part of the Grade 10 curriculum as a component of life skills classes with objectives relating to health, informed decision making, and personal responsibility – all topics addressed by the “Talk to Your Doc” program.

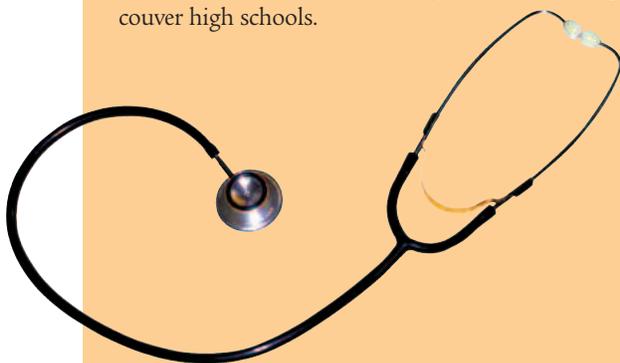
Facilitated by groups of four to six UBC medical students, the workshop addresses such topics as the importance of good communication, how to bring up and discuss difficult problems, confidentiality in the doctor-patient relationship, and how to find or change doctors. Although the general workshop format is standardized, the medical students are free to personalize and enhance it in a number of ways, resulting in a flexible presentation that can be adapted to the strengths of the facilitators and the needs of individual classes. Workshop topics were identified by a needs assessment survey conducted in eight Vancouver high schools.

Anatomy of a Workshop (typically 60–70 minutes)

- Icebreaker to establish rapport with the high school students
- Opening skit performed by medical students to illustrate some of the problems that can arise if adolescents cannot communicate well with the doctor
- Small group discussions that include:
 - role-play about the kind of problems adolescents can go to their doctor about
 - communication skills training for effectively bringing up and discussing difficult problems, resolving disagreements and making the most of an appointment
 - information on confidentiality
- Review of key points
- Evaluations completed by students and teachers

Medical students are recruited for the “Talk to Your Doc” program at the end of their first semester, after they have developed skills in communication and facilitation in small groups. (UBC’s medical curriculum emphasizes these skills.) They attend a two-hour training seminar run by the program team, where they also get a firsthand account of what doing a workshop is really like from medical students who are experienced workshop facilitators. In addition to familiarizing the medical students with the components of the workshop and how to deliver it, training emphasizes the medical students’ role as facilitators, not advice-dispensing doctors or medical school admissions insiders – although they often stick around after a workshop to answer the inevitable questions about medical school. Facilitators are taught to respond to questions about health problems with questions of their own (“So how would you ask your doctor about that?”), thus encouraging students to focus on the communication skills emphasized in the workshop. The new facilitators now ready to go, workshops are set up at partner schools through a CAPP counselor and “Talk to Your Doc” is poised for action.

Thanks in part to financial support provided by the Vancouver School Board, B.C. Lung Association and MDS Metro Laboratory Services, 64 workshops have been delivered by 181 medical students to 1651 high school students in six schools since the program started in 1999. Evaluation surveys administered to the high school students at the end of each workshop have consistently shown that the workshops are enthusiastically received and address the issues raised in the needs assessment surveys. The medical students relate well and have great credibility with their adolescent peers, and as a result, high school students are fully engaged in their learning. Comments from the students themselves provide one measure of the success of the project:



“It helped me understand what the doctor can do and can’t do.”
 “You can talk to your doctor about other things besides illnesses.”
 “You guys knew exactly what kids were afraid to talk to their doctor about.”

The benefits extend beyond the adolescent audience to the medical student facilitators, who gain new insights into this important demographic of their future patients. They say they find the program to be very worthwhile, and many return in their second, third and even fourth years of medicine to facilitate more workshops. Said one facilitator, “I ran into one of the students after we had given our presentation ... and was thrilled to hear that she was going to be thinking about it next time she visits her doctor and trying to incorporate some of the communication skills ... To me there could have been no better affirmation that our objectives were achieved.”

Teachers have also given the program glowing reviews, saying that the medical students are skilled facilitators and good role models. “Everyone seemed very comfortable and approachable, and as a result students took part enthusiastically” wrote one Vancouver teacher. Teachers also note that the students continue to refer to what they learned at the workshop, providing further support for the program’s effectiveness. “Talk to Your Doc” thus serves as a mutually beneficial partnership between a medical school and the high school education system: the medical school meets its social responsibility mandate, high schools have a popular and creative way of meeting their objectives for health education, and students from both learn to become better communicators.

“Talk to Your Doc” should be easy to replicate in any community with a medical school. The cost is low – refreshments for the training seminar and salary for a part-time student coordinator. The resource is renewable – a fresh wave of medical students each year. The outcomes are fun and valued by all the players.

While workshops continue to be in high demand in all partner schools, they seem to be most valued by those with a diverse population or located in less affluent areas; the need is greater and the added value of medical students as role models more important. In Vancouver, with its diverse population, there are often cultural barriers to seeking health-related information and a lack of information available about the health system to new families. Often the students – who are the first English-speaking generation – are the most important family members in bringing the information home, and ultimately in adopting new cultural norms about seeking medical support.

Every year, the demand for “Talk to Your Doc” workshops exceeds the supply due to several challenges: coordinating the medical students’ schedule with that of each school’s classes; the need for schools to be relatively close to the university or hospital to minimize facilitator travel time; and the number of medical students available to run workshops. Although there is interest from other schools in hosting the program, we have not been able to accommodate more than the original six partner schools – until now. Expansion of UBC’s medical school, with programs in

EN BREF Le projet Talk to Your Doc de l’École de médecine de l’Université de la Colombie-Britannique a été créé par des étudiantes et des étudiants en médecine pour aider les élèves du secondaire à développer des liens plus autonomes, actifs et conviviaux avec les médecins. Les étudiantes et les étudiants ont organisé des ateliers sur divers sujets comme l’importance d’avoir une bonne communication, la façon d’aborder et de parler de problèmes difficiles, la confidentialité de la relation médecin-patient et la manière de trouver un médecin ou de changer le sien quand on en est insatisfait. Les élèves du secondaire, leur personnel enseignant et les personnes qui ont animé les ateliers ont tous fait l’éloge du programme pour sa capacité de sensibiliser et d’ouvrir des canaux de communication.

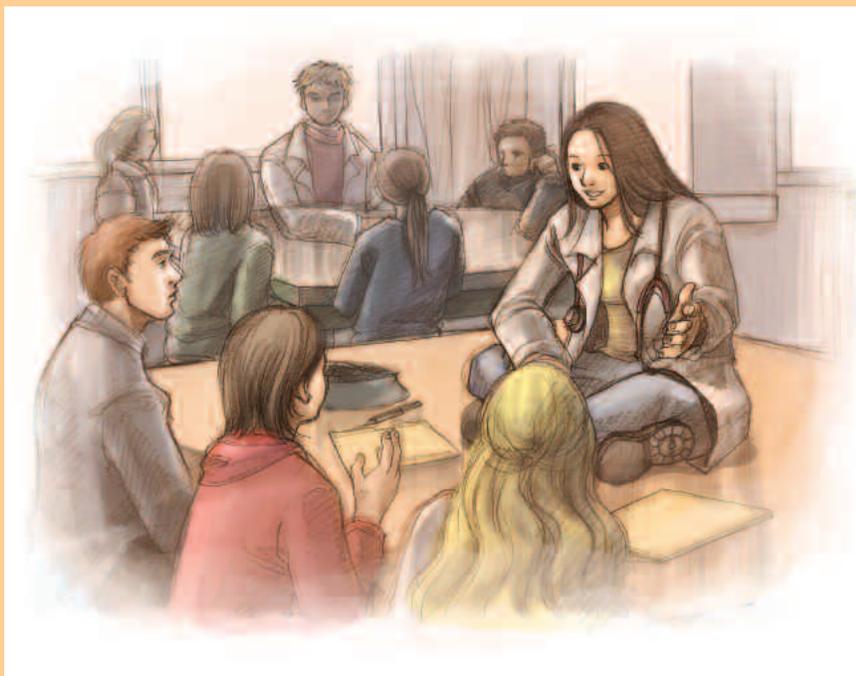


Illustration by Sherry Hsiutien Lai

Victoria and Prince George in January 2005, provides us with an exciting opportunity to introduce “Talk to Your Doc” in those communities and enhance the program in Vancouver as well. In November 2004 we trained our largest group of facilitators yet (over 40% of the first year class), which included medical students from all three sites. With increased numbers of facilitators for Vancouver and enthusiastic pioneers heading to Prince George and Victoria to pilot the project in those cities, “Talk to Your Doc” will soon be empowering adolescents all over British Columbia to take control of their own health care. ■

Through their work with the Division of Health Care Communication, DR. ANGELA TOWLE, DR. BILL GODOLPHIN and SAMANTHA VAN STAALDUINEN aim to acquire insight into the health professional-client encounter and develop interventions that lead to greater client involvement in decisions about their health care.

VALERIE OVERGAARD, PhD is Associate Superintendent for Learning Services for the Vancouver School Board where she has responsibility for all curricular and special program areas.

For more information on the work of the Division of Health Care Communication visit <http://www.health-disciplines.ubc.ca/DHCC/index.html>

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“I think its really great that you guys are doing this. Teens often feel scared and nervous and do not know where to go for help, advice and guidance regarding doctors.”
 – Grade 11 student, John Oliver Senior Secondary