

School nurses as advocates for youth tobacco education programs: The TAR WARS experience.

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Abstract:

School nurses are in a unique position to offer health-related curriculum to elementary school students. The TAR WARS program, an interactive tobacco education program aimed at fifth graders is an example of a program school nurses can teach without committing a huge amount of resources. The program offers regional and state coordinated activities.

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While health-related curricula generally have been handled by teaching staff, opportunities exist for school nurses to both facilitate and participate in innovative health programming for elementary school students. One example of such programming is TAR WARS, an interactive, anti-tobacco program designed for fifth grade youth.

TAR WARS was developed jointly in 1988 by members of Doctors Ought to Care (DOC) in Denver, Colo., and staff from the Hall of Life Education Center, Denver Museum of Natural History, with the goal of discouraging initiation of tobacco use among school-children.[1] This program was rapidly disseminated across the United States and attracted several noteworthy awards including recognition by the World Health Organization, American Medical Association, and Dept. of Health and Human Services. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) now operates the program under a license agreement with the National TAR WARS organization. This process allows the AAFP to encourage presentations by family physicians and other educators involved in promoting community health.

The AAFP, a national association of family physicians, represents more than 87,000 members in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. The AAFP has committed personnel and other resources to promote the TAR WARS program throughout the United States. A national TAR WARS Advisory Board provides input regarding program mission, goals, and priorities, under the auspices of the AAFP Commission on Public Health. A program manager, located at the Academy headquarters, directs day-to-day operations.

TAR WARS enlists state coordinators who facilitate running the program within their respective states. To date, the program is ongoing in 49 states, with varying levels of activity. The state coordinator is responsible for administration of the program including dissemination of the curriculum, consultation on program presentation, matching speakers and schools, coordinating a state poster contest, and evaluation. The AAFP TAR WARS program provides an annual national training conference for state coordinators and other interested persons. The AAFP also provides curriculum at no cost to presenters, technical consultation, resource networking within states, organization and administration of the national poster contest, and evaluation at a national level.

PROGRAM CONTENT

TAR WARS is a youth tobacco education program designed for fifth grade students. The program goal is to motivate youth to make positive health choices by increasing their awareness of both attitudes regarding use of tobacco and the effects of tobacco use on the body. Specific program objectives include: 1) increasing knowledge of the short-term effects of tobacco use; 2) identifying reasons for initiation of tobacco use; 3) increasing knowledge of the methods used in tobacco advertising; and 4) designing posters that emphasize the positive effects of not using tobacco. Specific details about TAR WARS are described in the program curriculum. The program is organized into three sections: a prepresentation classroom activity, classroom presentation, and follow-up poster contest (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The prepresentation activity, led by classroom teachers on the day prior to the TAR WARS presentation, examines students' impressions regarding the proportions of smokers among three age categories: fifth grade students, youth ages 12-17 years, and adults. After students estimate the percentage of smokers in each category, the actual percentages are reviewed and discussed. Students learn that smokers are really in the minority. Students also are prompted to begin thinking about the harmful effects of tobacco products and the positive effects of declining use.

The classroom presentation of TAR WARS is designed to be interactive and encourage enthusiastic participation. Presenters can be physicians, nurses, health educators, other allied health personnel, or anyone familiar with the program curriculum. The 45-minute program is organized around five key activities. Students first provide input on the short-term effects of tobacco use. Next, the effects of smoking on lung function are illustrated by having students breathe through a drinking straw while holding their noses. Since the mention of money serves to focus attention, students calculate the cost of smoking for one

month and one year, then discuss other, more enjoyable, uses for their money. During the next activity, students identify reasons why people begin to use tobacco and discussion is focused on the active choice to use or not use tobacco products. Finally, students work in groups to analyze the content of tobacco advertisements to heighten their awareness of inaccurate images and marketing strategies that are inconsistent with the short-term effects of tobacco use described by students earlier.

Following the presentation, students are encouraged to develop posters that emphasize the positive effects of not smoking and reinforce material discussed during the presentation. Posters developed by students are judged locally and can be displayed in the community. A state poster contest is held to identify the submission to the AAFP for the national poster contest held each June.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL NURSES

Tobacco abuse is associated with more than 400,000 deaths annually, exceeding the combined effects of suboptimal nutrition, lack of exercise, and alcohol.[2] Therefore, any efforts that might reduce initiation of tobacco use, such as primary prevention, are likely to yield significant dividends in the health of individuals and communities. The TAR WARS curriculum is targeted to an age group (11-12 year olds) where many youth begin to consider use of tobacco products.

TAR WARS is a nationally recognized tobacco education program which, to date, has been presented to an estimated 1 million children. Its structured curriculum, which uses an interactive approach to capture and maintain student interest, is consistent with school health curriculum objectives. It should be noted that there is no charge for the curriculum or classroom presentation. Presenters can be local physicians, nurses, health educators, or other allied health personnel with an interest in community health. Program presenters and participants have consistently expressed enthusiastic support.

As with most other community-based health education programs, to date, evaluation data is limited. The National Tar Wars Advisory Board is actively engaged in efforts to address this deficiency with plans to develop and implement an evaluation scheme in the next 12-18 months. Several nonpublished reports of selected populations have suggested short-term improvements in knowledge of the health effects of tobacco use and the methods employed by tobacco advertisers as assessed following program presentations. Evaluations to assess long-term information retention and behavior are planned.

Health education activities are included within the scope of practice for school nurses. The TAR WARS program conforms with standards and activities of school

nursing practice.[3, 4] These include activities which assist both students and school communities in maintaining maximal levels of wellness, as well as evaluating educational curricula and materials and encouraging implementation of beneficial programs. Moreover, the program is consistent with self-management skills that school nurses seek to reinforce.[3-5] School nurses are encouraged to act as a catalyst for organizing a TAR WARS presentation or coordinating a school poster contest.

Information to present the entire program is included within the structured curriculum that is available upon request from the AAFP by calling 1-800/TAR-WARS. With information of this nature, school nurses can enhance their effectiveness as advocates for delivery of high-quality health programs within the elementary school health curriculum.

TAR WARS is designed to promote healthy lifestyle choices by youth, encourage health care provider involvement in community health activities, and mobilize community support against youth tobacco use. School nurses are encouraged to review this youth tobacco education program and consider networking with other health professionals in their local communities to include the TAR WARS program as a key component of the elementary school health curriculum.

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