MEDiC’s “Health Talk” benefits underserved

By Laura Zimmerman

I stood outside the room, running through my presentation notes in my head. I reminded myself of the chemical mediators that caused vasoconstriction and ran through the lay terms needed to describe the parasympathetic response. I was about to step into my first “Health Talk,” in my new nursing student role as patient education leader for MEDiC, a student-run program of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed my shoulders back and pushed open the door.

There was no podium, no stadium seating, no shiny lights – just a dozen or more comfortable chairs positioned in a haphazard oval. The room was lit by a few leaning floor lamps that projected warmth and community.

In this particular location, Madison women gather to discuss their journey toward health and well-being on their way to a substance-free life. As a guest speaker, I came to present information on the chronic stress and non-pharmacological ways to reduce the negative effects of a crisis-to-crisis lifestyle.

The women filtered in the room and looked at me. I felt my age because of the skeptical way their eyebrows cocked when I introduced myself as a first-year nursing student. To say I was anxious would be an understatement. To say the hour-long session was a success would minimize the experience. I felt I had joined a new community with these women. We were all at different points in our quest for mental and physical well-being, but we came together to share what we had in common. We learned about the physiological effects of stress – how it impacts our mind, body, and spirit and what we can do about it.

This particular experience was eight months ago. Since then, MEDiC has expanded the Health Talk sessions to a total of four locations in the Madison area, meeting once monthly to gain and share information. These locations include a women’s homeless shelter, a group home for women transitioning from the criminal justice system, and a support group for women recovering from addictions. The number of women attending the monthly sessions ranges from 3 to 15.

Averaging four Health Talk sessions per month provides opportunity for approximately 20 nursing students and 10 medical students to volunteer with MEDiC’s Health Talk each semester. Pairing different disciplines delivers a mix of medical and nursing information, while capitalizing on each profession’s strength and fostering ties between future cross-disciplinary colleagues.

In addition to serving increased numbers of women, Health Talk has also become tailored to specific populations. This is accomplished through surveys given to the women and staff at Health Talk locations. The surveys provide an opportunity to give feedback and suggest Health Talk topics. Frequent requests are stress reduction, coping skills, women’s sexual health, and the effects of alcohol and nicotine. Health Talk is taking off, working to empower women through knowledge.

My experience with MEDiC fueled my desire to further explore the interprofessional field of public health and to pursue the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree through UW-Madison’s BS in nursing to MPH degree option. In doing so, I found my passion and niche within the far-reaching field of nursing practice.

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