

EWC INTERVIEW WITH DR. FISHER

Dr. Michael B. Fisher has come a long way from working as a Peace Corps physician in La Paz, Bolivia to his efforts through community outreach to educate and prevent childhood obesity in Santa Barbara County. As the founder and director of the Diabetes Resource Center, Santa Barbara for the past eight years, Dr. Fisher's efforts which initially began with adult obesity, now focus on the whole family, especially the kids in Santa Barbara who need the intervention now. Juggling his practice, family, and teaching responsibilities, he helped launch the Carpinteria Childhood Obesity Initiative (CCOPI) and the Early Wellness Center (EWC). Despite the demands of his time, he still had a moment to pause, sit, and share his vision with Public Relations Coordinator, JoJo Wahlstrom...

Q: What are the most important components for a successful obesity prevention program?

DR. FISHER: Knowledge, hope and trust within the target population are the most critical factors. Our success so far is based on the people who have great competence and compassion towards those we work with.

Q: What are your concerns for this epidemic of obesity and diabetes that we're facing?

DR. FISHER: The great concern is that childhood obesity is associated with life-threatening diseases which will shorten the lifespan of those affected. The immediate affects that occur from childhood obesity in our children are lowered self-esteem, unhappiness, and smaller windows to achieve academic success.

Q: What will the Early Wellness Center provide?

DR. FISHER: By educating young family members in the pre-natal period about wellness and prevention for their children and themselves, the family will become important role models for the children.

We're looking at comprehensive nutrition and toddler-friendly exercise programs from birth to age 5, which will prepare them for a healthy and productive elementary school experience.

Q: This is a big project. Do you have any supporters?

DR. FISHER: The community is really buying into this and we have the support from numerous organizations including Cottage Hospital, First Five, Family Service Agency, Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, the Public Health Department, Orfalea, Bower and Hutton Foundations, UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education/Child Development, the list goes on.

Q: How is UCSB going to help?

DR. FISHER: The Gevirtz Graduate School of Education has experts in child development, and some of their grad students and faculty will use the EWC to study the effects of our early wellness program on the academic success and emotional well-being with the kids.

The grad students will also be conducting research on sexually transmitted diseases and addressing the issue of early pregnancies as part of self-esteem issues in teen mothers.

Q: What are your fundraising plans?

DR. FISHER: We plan to make the EWC so attractive that not only families who can't afford it can come, but families who can and anyone interested in the center can participate for small donations or foundation support.

The DRC staff is working on hosting a celebrity tennis fundraising tournament, beach soccer tournament, and a harvest dinner fundraiser using the produce grown from the gardens in our after-school sites.

Q: Where is the EWC going to be located?

DR. FISHER: We were able to secure the Main School Campus after we sold the concept to the school board, superintendents, and politicians in Carpinteria.

Q: It seems like you've gotten a lot of support from people to make this happen.

DR. FISHER: It's really because of the great success of the CCOPI and the kids losing weight, and becoming happier, better students. Actions and results speak volumes.

Q: What classes will be offered to the families and the community?

DR. FISHER: We'll have a teaching kitchen to complement our gardening program, and bilingual health, exercise, and cooking classes with instructors and chefs from Santa Barbara City College for moms and toddlers.

We will also include yoga classes to teach parents to become more sensitive to their bodies and to reduce stress, and we will have guest physician speakers from the Physician Speaker's Bureau and the Medical Society of Santa Barbara to contribute to health education for the families.

Q: What about medical care?

DR. FISHER: We will be working with the medical staff and residency training program from Cottage Hospital and the USC Keck School of Medicine to screen young moms for gestational diabetes, and help to educate the mothers about nutrition and exercise and stress.

The health staff and medical residents will also screen kids and parents who have hypertension, metabolic syndrome, or early diabetes, and will refer the families to an appropriate clinic. We hope to have the support of Public Health and the local clinics for referrals and insurance for those eligible.

Q: There are a lot of families in need of this service, but there is the issue of illegal immigration and the fear of deportation.

DR. FISHER: We are very sensitive about the issues and fears of illegal immigration. We know that even an illegal immigrant who has a child in the United States will receive medical care. Everything between the staff members and the family will be absolutely confidential.

By winning the confidence and trust of the families that come into the center, the fears of being deported will be alleviated, and they will begin to understand that our only concern is the well-being of their children and their family.

Q: There will be those skeptics and doubters out there about something this comprehensive being successful.

DR. FISHER: We're not naïve, we understand the complexity of the human condition, and that's why early prevention is a must. We can't have just an organization, we must have the community to support this. Because of the extremely complex nature of childhood diabetes, it will "take a village".

It's a bold experiment, and the problems of obesity in children or anybody are extremely complex. If you start with a child or adult that is already obese, it's a difficult to have a positive outcome. But, if you start with a blank slate, start with an infant, and hammer it home from the time they're born, we've got a chance.

Q: I think the sensitivity to the culture and obstacles these families face is really important when trying to help people better themselves.

DR. FISHER: We are dealing with a strong belief system and culture and ethnicity, and those are very difficult variables to change, but it's such a logical thing.

We know we can't change the genes, the genes are there, but I feel like the environment trumps the genes.

If we can change the environment and create hope and trust within the family, there's a light at the end of the tunnel and we can begin to change the behavior, de-condition, and create a healthier society.

Q: What is the timeline to start the EWC?

DR. FISHER: The Center which is a component of the Carpinteria Community Collaborative will start functioning in Winter 2008 at a smaller level, serving approximately 20-30 infants and toddlers and their parents. Within two years, I think we'll see it really take off.

Q: You've got a lot of work ahead of you.

DR. FISHER: There's a feeling of excitement and energy and the community, and this is the best alternative, the only alternative, so it's a good project. We've taken the first step of a 10,000 mile journey, and although we have a long way to go, I'm encouraged by the support we're receiving from the Carpinteria and Santa Barbara communities.

* For more information about the programs or to get involved, contact the DRC at 805-687-5586 or by email at info@sbdrc.org.