

## DR. FISHER: The Epidemic of Obesity-Related Health Issues

Hope. A single word with the potential for impact on those that may have little of it- this small word used in a small way by Dr. Michael B. Fisher has had a powerful effect.

The epidemic of obesity-related health problems like diabetes, heart disease, and kidney failure has crept upon the American public in the past few years and for those fighting the good fight, hope may be difficult to see on the horizon.

Dr. Fisher witnessed the damaging effects of obesity and diabetes in the community and founded the Diabetes Resource Center of Santa Barbara eight years ago in response to the epidemic, working tirelessly to advocate prevention.

“Physicians are treating the effects not the disease itself, and I want to change that,” said Dr. Fisher.

As the phrase “Fat America” is emerging in newspapers and magazines, Dr. Fisher believes prevention is the key to curb the war on obesity and diabetes.

“My inspiration to continue to educate is the thought of not seeing children becoming sick and developing diabetes,” said Dr. Fisher. “We can prevent it and if we have positive outcomes, we can make a difference and stop child abuse and suffering.”

Dr. Fisher’s vision for early prevention has taken hold in the form of another program he founded called the Carpinteria Childhood Obesity Prevention Initiative (CCOPI) which caters to the kids in Carpinteria schools and works to keep the kids active and healthy and the newly introduced Santa Barbara Childhood Obesity Initiative.

The Carpinteria after-school program was founded two years ago and has included sports, dance and cheerleading, nutrition and gardening classes, and some tutoring taught by local city college and UCSB student instructors with widespread success, according to Dr. Fisher.

“These programs that are building off of the DRC are unique in that they incorporate all the best techniques to modify human behavior and prevent disease and suffering; it’s really all comprehensive,” said Dr. Fisher.

The activities aim to keep the kids active and interested in exercising and learning new skills, and in turn many of the at-risk children are losing weight and feeling better about themselves, said Dr. Fisher.

“We are now at a crossroads, explained Dr. Fisher. “We have finished up the two-year CCOPI education and activity program in Carpinteria and are being contacted by other communities to bring this program to them, but we need funding to spread this; children are literally dying right now.”

The goal of the CCOPI after-school program with the help of a \$240,000 grant from the California Endowment was to conduct a pilot study to see if Dr. Fisher’s notion of prevention through education and physical activity with children would reduce the risk of obesity and diabetes.

According to Dr. Fisher, the comprehensive approach of nutrition education activity showed a positive outcome in many of the students with drops in weight after the program and increased self-confidence.

“The problem of obesity and diabetes is so complex that anything less than comprehensive is a waste,” said Dr. Fisher. “We want a lasting change, not something transitory or temporary.”

As a kid, Dr. Fisher remembers playing outside, reading, playing sports and frequent trips to the school yard by himself to play.

The loss of motivation or ability to go out and play and be a kid is very present in schools across the country, and CCOPI and the instructors are the motivators to get kids feeling good about themselves, said Dr. Fisher.

“I see this taking off and communities buying into our product,” said Dr. Fisher. I see myself cutting back on my practice in 10 years and continuing full on to develop a model wellness and prevention program to use throughout the country.”

The mantra of the CCOPI that is a continued reminder for the staff is “Healthy children are our hope for the future,” and the continued perseverance to create a better life for the kids in Carpinteria and Santa Barbara County is modeled after these simple words.

“Hope for the future always lies in the youth,” explained Dr. Fisher. “The youth will one day take over and will need to make critical decisions and deal with geopolitical issues; they can’t do that if they’re sick.” “A healthy child will have the best opportunity to be a great leader.”

Dr. Fisher’s journey from working in the Peace Corps as a physician in 1969 in La Paz, Bolivia to develop a similar program, to now seeing the vision continue across continents has been both arduous and deeply rewarding.

“This journey has taught me to be like a turtle, to be persevering, slow, steady and balanced, and to keep a sense of humor about everything,” remarked Dr. Fisher. “It’s also taught me to have hope, and history shows us that. “Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness,” and I believe that’s true, said Dr. Fisher.”

The message of hope for the future, for the children and the patients already affected by disease is a continued presence in Dr. Fisher’s life and the lives of those who, like him, work to spread the message of prevention and wellness.

“With hope, the challenges aren’t so daunting to me anymore,” said Dr. Fisher. “Being involved in this program brings the greatest pleasure and the biggest obstacles; this is the first step of a thousand mile journey, and taking the first step means you’re on your way.”

\* For more information about the programs or to get involved, contact the DRC at 805-687-5586 or by email at [info@sbdrc.org](mailto:info@sbdrc.org).