

The Illinois Disability and Health Program: Partnering with Area Medical Schools to Teach Disability Awareness to Tomorrow's Health Care Professionals

Public Health Issue

Receiving quality wellness care and maintaining good health is a priority for everyone, but often difficult for people with disabilities to achieve. The Illinois' Disability and Health Program (IDHP) conducted focus group interviews among people with disabilities about health care access. The primary barrier reported was health care providers who lack the cultural sensitivity and competency necessary to treat the individual's full wellness needs. Training future medical professionals about disability awareness is an important step to overcome this barrier.

Program Overview

With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), IDHP collaborated with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine in Springfield (SIU) beginning in 2009 to develop a disability awareness course for second-year medical students. The goal was to build a foundation of communication skills for better care and interaction with patients with disabilities. A panel presentation focused on the experiences of five people with disabilities: a person with visual impairment, a person with hearing impairment, a person with speech impairment, a person with a mobility limitation, and the parent of a child with a developmental disability. Each described their experiences accessing health care and offered tips on cultural sensitivity and disability etiquette.

Making a Difference

In addition to SIU, IDHP is also partnering with the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine to increase disability awareness among medical students. The collaboration between the Illinois Disability and Health Program and these area medical schools is yielding promising results. While the specific format of the training varies across each school, by the end of 2011, more than 1,500 medical and physician assistant students will have completed disability awareness trainings. Each school is committed to continue the project in future years.

Shaping Tomorrow

The program will continue to recruit additional health professional training programs and assist them in adding this important component to their curriculum. With awareness training available early in their careers, the next generation of medical providers will be able to reduce the barriers that people with disabilities currently face.

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"To communicate effectively with me, in a nutshell, I think I would say: Slow down, talk to ME, ask questions, LISTEN and tell me if you need ME to help YOU. We both want the same thing—the best possible medical care."

—Jeff Schumacher,
Disability Awareness Panelist



Back: Leslie Montgomery, Gary Rull, M.D., Ross Silverman,
Middle: Theresa Reiser, Carolyn Thorpe, Marian Dramin, Carla Cox
Front: Jeff Schumacher, Fern Pinkley