

McGill medical students become Sexperts

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Following school funding cuts, group wanted youth to get necessary info

Two years ago, five first-year medical students at McGill University here got together to brainstorm about how they could right a wrong created by an educational reform that derailed the teaching of sex education to Quebec high school students. The result was Sexperts, an innovative health-care project aimed at curbing the rate of sexually transmitted infections among youth—and a concept that is spreading to medical and other health-science faculties across Quebec.

“We never thought it would become this big,” Marie-Renée Lajoie, one of the group’s co-founders, told the Medical Post. “It’s really been an amazing success story.”

According to Lajoie, she and her fellow medical students were worried by the impact of funding cuts for sex education courses at Quebec high schools contained in a provincial educational reform in 2004. Onus for the courses, which for years had been given by provincially paid school nurses and private sexologists, shifted to regular teachers—a move that was denounced by the latter’s union and led to both a decline in the frequency and content of sex-ed classes at many schools, and the abolition of classes in others.

Rise in STDs

“It didn’t make any sense,” recalled Lajoie. “Teenagers weren’t getting any more education (but) statistics showed that people in that age group were getting sicker.”

In addition to increases in teenage pregnancies, she said, some sexually transmitted diseases that had been in decline in Montreal for years—most notably syphilis—were again on the rise.

After finding and studying community-based sex-ed programs put together by medical students at other Canadian universities and at schools in several European countries—research facilitated by the International Federation of Medical Student Associations—the McGill group developed its own program. In particular, they built activities and course material that revolved around five themes: contraception, pregnancies, STIs, sexual orientation and relationships.

“Our idea wasn’t to replace the government (program),” explained Lajoie. “We just wanted to help out by engaging teenagers in dynamic and interactive presentations.”

Once she and her colleagues felt they were ready, Lajoie said they offered their services to the École secondaire Pierre-Dupuy in Hochelega-Maisonnette, a high school in one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods on the island of Montreal.

Reaction from the roughly 150 Grade 11 and 12 students who took the two hour-long classes the McGill med students gave at the school during the 2005/06 school year were “overwhelmingly positive,” said Lajoie. “We helped to clarify a lot of the information they see on the Internet,” she added. “And we debunked some myths (such as) there is a cure for AIDS.”

Last year, Sexperts were invited to a second school. This year, they have been invited to a half-dozen more schools. To keep up with demand, the group has attracted and trained several more med students from both McGill and the University of Montreal, creating a unique collaborative bond between the city's two medical faculties.

By early December—when Sexperts gave HIV/AIDS awareness classes to more than 500 high school students during a two-week blitz in conjunction with the group's new partner, Médecins du Monde, to help mark International AIDS Day—the group counted 40 medical student member/trainers.

The concept has also now spread to the medical faculties at Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivières and Laval (Quebec City), where Lajoie said medical and other health-science students are putting together their own programs for local high schools.

The group's goal now, she added, is to refine and develop its training program in an effort to reach out to more faculties.

"We don't want or have to rely only on med students," said Lajoie, who is currently doing a clerkship in obstetrics at LaSalle Hospital here. "When it comes to sex education, the goal is getting the right info and getting the right people—teachers, nurses, parents, friends or whoever—to talk to teenagers at the right time."