



Good health in youth sets the stage for well-being in later life

13 August 2010 -- Many young people engage in behaviours that are dangerous not only to their current state of health, but also puts their health at risk for years to come.

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Transcript of the podcast

Veronica Riemer: You're listening to the WHO podcast and my name is Veronica Riemer. In this episode we look at the importance of communication during adolescence.

Good communication is key to working with young people. It helps build trust, and encourages them to seek advice and use health services. It establishes and maintains good relationships, and is an active process that involves listening, questioning, understanding and responding. This August marks the beginning of the International Year of Youth for which the theme is "Dialogue and Mutual Understanding".

Good health is important for young people as it sets the stage for well-being in later life. While most young people are healthy, more than 1.8 million young people aged 15 to 24 die each year, mostly due to preventable causes. Many more engage in behaviours that are dangerous not only to their current state of health, but also puts their health at risk for years to come. Promoting healthy lifestyles, and taking steps to better educate and protect this group from health risks will ensure longer, more productive lives.

Launching the International Year of Youth Thoraya Obaid, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, outlined some of the main issues affecting young people today.

Thoraya Obaid: At the beginning of this International Year of Youth, we commit to working together to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities facing young people, wherever they are, whatever the situation they find themselves, whether in peace or in conflict zones, those affected by poverty and those affected by natural disasters. We pledge to make youth a priority in our work, and in partnership with young people, to identify ways to promote the leadership and well being of young women and men.

Veronica Riemer: Dr Chandra-Mouli leads the adolescent health team in WHO's Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development. He tells us how WHO is providing communication training for health workers so that they can respond to adolescents both effectively and with sensitivity.

Dr Chandra-Mouli: We have developed training materials to help health workers understand and work with adolescents in real life situations. For example, when an adolescent comes in with a parent and is not communicating at all and the parent does all the talking, the health worker needs to understand that there is something going on here. They have to deal with in a way that takes into account the concerns and needs of the parent, while at the same time recognizing clearly that without talking to the adolescent in private, there would be important information not gathered. They need to be able to have the parent wait outside while they talk to the adolescent in private. Then they need to think about how they can share some of this information with the adolescent's permission, with the parent. These are the kind of things that we help health workers to build their abilities in.

This is a huge challenge, not just in developing countries, but in developed countries as well. In most countries of the world, rich and poor, developed and undeveloped there are no training programmes for health workers on this, so doctors and nurses in Germany or in the UK as much as doctors in Uganda and India or elsewhere.

Veronica Riemer: Ivy Kigundu is 16 years old and from Uganda, but she lives and goes to school in France.

Ivy Kigundu: I think that a lot of the health problems that affect me and my friends start from having worries or uncertainty, and feeling like we can't really talk to our parents or teachers about it. These worries can be about school, social pressures, wanting to fit in, the fear of being different, and following the crowd just to have friends. When I see all my friends doing something, I'll think it's normal and I want try it too -- whether that's for example smoking or drinking alcohol, or even having sex. But a time when you have to try and limit yourself and try to say "no" sometimes.

In different parts of the world, teenagers are affected by different issues; like in France or Switzerland, the main things are smoking and drinking. That is because it is so liberal here, whereas in southern Africa or in my country, you see some young people that smoke and drink and that is on the increase; but, I think that HIV/AIDS is much more of a serious and important issue that's really happening in my country.

Veronica Riemer: Paul Bloem works at WHO Headquarters and provides support to countries in their work on adolescent health. He is also the father of two adolescents. He tells us that a supportive environment is critical in creating confidence and self-esteem in young people.

Paul Bloem: Young people, when given the opportunity, will make the right choices to behave in ways that their health is not affected. As societies, as parents and as health workers, I think our duty is to make sure that we make the environment for young people in such a way that they can make the best of their lives, to stay healthy and to develop and grow up into productive, young men and women.

Veronica Riemer: That's all for this episode of the WHO podcast. Thanks for listening. For more information about the International Year of Youth, you can access the links on the transcript page of this podcast. You can also follow the International Year on Facebook and Twitter. For the World Health Organization, this is Veronica Riemer in Geneva.

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