

EXTRA! EXTRA!

By Barbara Ravage



NEW CENTER FOR EATING DISORDERS

Thanks to a \$600,000 grant from the Duke Endowment, the Center for Disordered Eating, which is a brainchild of Dr. Rager, opened its doors May 2008. Levine Children's Hospital has committed to additional in-kind funding, bringing the total to more than \$1.2 million over its first three years of operation. The center will gather under one roof the services known to be most effective in the treatment of eating disorders. Replacing the piecemeal approach with an experienced team, Dr. Rager is working with a psychologist, nutritionist, health educator, and nurse coordinator.

According to Dr. Rager, eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, with suicide being the main cause of death. Despite public perception that eating disorders occur predominantly among white middle-to upper-class females, she says, disordered eating and body image disturbances transcend race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The Center will treat at-risk teens as well as those with a formal diagnosis.

Kristin Rager

Helping Teens Make Healthy Choices

When Kristin Rager gets on her soapbox, here's what she says: "Adolescents are faced with decisions that can impact their health both immediately and long-term. The top three causes of death for teens are accidental trauma, homicide, and suicide. The ridiculous thing is that each of these is 100 percent preventable."

Teen Health Connection (THC), a free-standing clinic in Charlotte, North Carolina, was founded in 2001 by a coalition of community organizations, including Carolinas Medical Center, to address the lack of specialized health care for adolescents in Mecklenburg County. Dr. Rager came onboard as medical director in September 2006, convinced that a multidisciplinary team approach combining access to primary care, mental health services, and education can have a positive effect on teens at risk.

"Teen Health Connection was started in response to a need that our community was wise enough to see. Our organization's entire purpose is to help teens make better choices, whether it's substance use, smoking, sexual activity, violence, even seeking out medical care when they need it," she says.

Rager got her MD at the University of Louisville and her MPH from Ohio State. She has a unique perspective as one of fewer than 500 physicians in the US who are board certified in adolescent medicine. She believes in getting to kids early, before they have developed habits and made decisions that will negatively affect the rest of their lives. "The top three killers of adults—cancer, cardiovascular disease, and stroke—are all related to behaviors that people adopt when they are adolescents, such as smoking, inadequate exercise, improper diet," she points out.

In 2007, THC provided comprehensive health care services to 2,400 young people, aged 11–21. (More than two-thirds were African American and slightly less than two-thirds were female). The clinic offers both primary care and specialty consultation in reproductive health, emotional and behavioral issues, weight problems and eating disorders, and other concerns during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Through a partnership with the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, it is the health care provider for all adolescents in foster care. As the area's only comprehensive health care clinic exclusively for this age group, it meets an essential need in a community where almost 40 percent of high school students report not having seen a doctor or health care provider in the previous year for a check-up or physical exam unless they were sick or injured.

THC receives half its funding from patient fees, a third from the United Way, and the remainder from grants, contracts, and donations. It has a decade-long partnership with Carolinas HealthCare System, including the Levine Children's Hospital and the Department of Pediatrics at Carolinas Medical Center.

In addition to a team of physicians, nurses and nurse practitioners, and a community health educator, THC has five mental health providers, which Dr. Rager says is as unusual as it is invaluable. "We know that a large percentage of teens in Charlotte identified that they did not have an adult to whom they could talk about their problems, so to provide an adult who can just listen to what a teen has to say has an enormous impact on the life of that teen." ❖