



Tar Wars!

Sebasticook Valley Hospital Fights Youth Tobacco Use



According to the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a project of Maine’s Coordinated School Health program, the amount of middle school students who have ever tried smoking tobacco has decreased. In fact, only 20 percent of middle school students surveyed reported ever trying smoking, which is a dramatic drop from a reported 36 percent in 2001. Much of this success can be attributed to early intervention tobacco prevention efforts, which adhere to the National Center for Disease Control’s multi-faceted Guidelines for School Health Programs Prevent Tobacco Use.

In central Maine, since 1999, one hospital has led the charge to provide area schools with tobacco prevention education. Staff at Sebasticook Valley Hospital (SVH) team up with area elementary schools in Dexter, Etna-Dixmont, Corinna, St. Albans, Hartland, Palmyra, Newport, and Pittsfield to offer Tar Wars. Tar Wars is a national award-winning, tobacco-free education program targeting fourth and fifth graders. Administered by the American Academy of Family Physicians, this unique program uses effective and innovative approaches to teaching tobacco prevention, focusing on the short-term, image-based consequences of tobacco use and how to think critically about tobacco advertising.

“I feel the Tar Wars program offers the students an opportunity to hear about tobacco from a resource person, such as Laurie Alexander at Sebasticook Valley Hospital,” says Tamra Monette, fourth grade teacher at Newport Elementary. “She exposes the students to the realities of the danger of tobacco use. It is done in a non-threatening, informative, relaxed manner. My students have always enjoyed and learned a great deal from the Tar Wars program.”

Laurie Alexander and other community health educators from Sebasticook Valley Hospital visit the classrooms and present using a lesson plan provided by Tar Wars at no cost to the schools. During the presentation, students are guided through a series of interactive activities designed to increase knowledge of short-term effects of tobacco use. “SVH is committed to providing this service to area schools and believes this to be an invaluable service to area children,” Laurie explains, “During the presentation we discuss who is using tobacco, the students do a breathing exercise with a straw to demonstrate what it feels like to get less oxygen, and they do a math exercise to determine how much an individual would spend on tobacco over the course of a year and throughout one’s lifetime.”



Students from both Newport Elementary in Newport (left) and Vickery School in Pittsfield (right) show off posters they created for a Tar Wars poster contest.

Both the Sebasticook Valley Hospital community educators and participating elementary school teachers have been thrilled with the students’ response to the program. Heidi Clark, fourth grade student from Newport Elementary, says, “It’s a benefit to fourth graders so they don’t start smoking at an early age and they won’t damage parts of their body.”

So, with the help of one small Maine hospital, local students will continue to get the tools and knowledge to continue the fight against tobacco use.

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