

OPEN FORUM

HEALTHCORPS: SHAPING AMERICA'S FUTURE

By offering students healthy options, a new program is working today for a healthy tomorrow.

by Lisa and Mehmet Oz, M.D.

It is often said that statistics are just people with the tears wiped away. But when we consider the plight of today's youth, the numbers bring tears to my eyes. Approximately 300,000 deaths in the United States each year are attributed to unhealthy dietary habits and physical inactivity. Nearly two thirds of U.S. adults are overweight. We accomplished this ponderous feat by starting young. Over 30 percent of children and adolescents were at high risk for becoming overweight in 2000, a figure that has more than doubled since 1970. Obesity is expensive. As a nation, we spend \$33 billion annually on weight-loss products and services, in addition to the many billions more spent on direct medical care.

Not surprisingly, concerned ex-



In an all-out effort to combat childhood obesity, HealthCorps' coordinators empower high school students by providing the tools to become fit for life through in-/after-school seminars on diet, nutrition, and exercise.

perts are searching for solutions. One is mandating physical activity in schools, since only one state presently requires this—Illinois is the only state that requires PE every day

from kindergarten through high school—and 25 percent of young people (ages 12–21 years) report no daily vigorous physical activity. However, only half the time in a gym class is typically spent at exercise, and the kids most in need benefit the least from typical games such as tag, where they are picked last and eliminated first. Food is the other usual suspect. But how do you bring solutions into the family kitchen when parents are not listening?

As a heart surgeon, I have struggled with this national catastrophe first-hand while managing obesity's serious

complications. As is so often true, necessity is the mother of invention. The rapidly growing program HealthCorps came to life after two distressing events. I was asked to perform coronary bypass surgery on a 25-year-old woman whose childhood obesity eventually caused one of the most common diseases of our age, metabolic syndrome—a cluster of symptoms such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar. This triple threat led to premature rusting of her arteries. Although my surgery to place grafts over her plaque-filled arteries may have been life-extending, I came away with the scary realization that high-tech interventions on 20-somethings were simply rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

About the same time, our nation's Health and Human Services Administration convened a committee to discuss childhood obesity. When invited,

Taking it to the streets! Last September, HealthCorps founder Dr. Oz led the walk for fitness after a rally at New York Presbyterian Hospital.



I felt blessed to have an opportunity to address the root causes behind the epidemic that threatens to bankrupt our future. We entertained 17 carefully studied solutions ranging from preventing kids from watching too much television to means of improving physical activity in our schools. The smart folks representing most of the major societies and groups charged with battling childhood obesity agreed that none of the 17 ideas individually offered the great promise we sought. I also became aware of the distressing reality that the most promising programs were designed for preschool or elementary-school children, where overweight incidence has increased 30 percent in the past decade. The conventional belief was that teenagers were too far advanced to influence, since we could not enlist the help of their parents. I returned to my daily surgery with the unsettling awareness that we were throwing in the towel on America's teens.

As is often the case, an epiphany struck after a most unlikely stimulus. Our eldest daughter, Daphne, asked if I would speak to her high-school classmates about health. The talk was challenging, since kids demand a higher level of entertainment. They also want to know how your insights can change their lives, so I carefully thought through the program. The talk, however, proved particularly stimulating because the kids were surprisingly curious about their bod-

ies. By the next morning, I had a dozen messages on my desk from parents of these kids. They wanted to know if the insights their kids brought home the prior night were really correct. What a revelation. Not only could we educate high-school-age kids, they in turn could educate their parents (not the reverse). Since kids translate knowledge to action much more readily than parents, we had a viable vector to change society that advertisers long recognized and health educators ignored.

There was one catch, however. Getting the message to kids is a challenge for adults like me, but kids listen to other kids, especially older siblings who can act more like mentors than teachers. That is the genius of the HealthCorps. Like the Peace Corps, we began recruiting recent college grads and offering

small stipends for an opportunity to change the world. After five weeks of training and a teaching curriculum of seminars focused on diet, exercise, and mental resilience, HealthCorps "coordinators" are then placed into regional high schools. Today, thanks to the efforts of people like executive director Michelle Bouchard and the entire HealthCorps team, the program is quickly becoming a public health success story.

The program's mentor as-

"By giving students, parents, and community members the necessary tools to surround themselves with healthy options, HealthCorps is working today for a healthy America tomorrow."

—Mehmet C. Oz, M.D.,
founder of HealthCorps



During the study of resting metabolic rate (RMR), coordinators actually hook students up to a breathing apparatus to obtain a student's RMR stats.

pect may prove to be most important of all, because disturbing data from New York City indicate that 8 percent of kids are considering or have attempted suicide. HealthCorps believes that figure has increased dramatically over the past few decades because many

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Inspired by the program, 25-year-old Jorge Moreno (standing, left) leaves HealthCorps this year to attend medical school. Coordinators like Moreno provide students with pedometers and sponsor schoolwide contests to see who can reach a million steps first. (Above) Oprah Winfrey's colleague Gayle King attended a HealthCorps gala where coordinator Jennie Zhu outlined a "Just Say No to Diets" seminar.

kids have no mentors and no vision of what they want from life. With no guiding light on the serpentine path to adulthood, many teenagers search in vain. While the program teaches kids to take pride in and understand their most valuable inheritance—their bodies—it also gives them role models. And the campaign prospects for coordinators from within the area they teach, so that the coordinator better understands the particular culture in which the kids live and eat.

Knowledge really is power, and the kids become activists in their communities, reaching beyond the classroom. They work with local grocery owners to create markets for healthy snacks. Kids visit local operating rooms to see the ravages of unhealthy behaviors and appreciate the job possibilities offered by careers in health sciences. HealthCorps helps kids contribute to society by promoting habits that will ultimately reduce healthcare expenses and cost taxpayers less in the future. We believe that these kids bring about important shifts in personal and others' attitudes and behaviors, and we are now pursuing multischool studies to measure this shift and other suggested benefits.

College graduates who sign up to help HealthCorps are very similar to their energetic colleagues who pursue the Peace Corps. Many, such as 25-year-old Jorge Moreno, who is leaving HealthCorps this year for the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, are interested in medicine and in making a difference in our communities.

"I really began to see the effect of the HealthCorps this year through Eddie, one of my students. I couldn't tell for the first couple of months whether Eddie was even getting what I was saying. But then, during my Digestive Highway seminar, I asked Eddie what effect fiber would have on his body, expecting him to simply answer that it would make him feel full," says Moreno. "Instead, Eddie said, 'When fiber reaches my stomach, the hormone leptin tells my brain I'm satisfied.' I thought, 'Whoa...this is amazing. This kid really gets it!' Moments like this have reinforced my decision to become a pediatrician, so I can continue to help others like Eddie lead a healthier lifestyle."

We needed a curriculum with hip ways of making critical points fun for teenagers. Dr. Mike Roizen and I

had just written *YOU: The Owner's Manual*, and many teenagers enjoyed reading the sometimes-irreverent text. We modified elements and combined these with a wonderful resource created by Daphne, the same daughter who unwittingly started the entire process with her invitation to teach her classmates. The book she wrote on her experiences with kids learning nutrition, entitled *The Dorm Room Diet*, became a blueprint in crafting the curriculum.

The beauty of HealthCorps is that although it eventually hopes to reach all the kids in a school, it doesn't have to. Research tells us that we only need to influence 10-20 percent of the population, since they are the caregivers and will shift the behaviors of many of their classmates. Our goal is to craft an edgy message that kids talk about at their lockers and in their homes.

"When I go shopping now, I always remember to look at the nutrition label, making sure that food is low in saturated fat and sugar," Karla Ramirez, a 10th grade HealthCorps student, says. "I have even decided to stop drinking soda because it is high in sugar and does not have any nutrients. My friends are really noticing!"

We give the kids news that they can use, and our litmus test for success is that students outside of our program start understanding and applying our message.

Seminar topics range from "The Biology of Fat" to "Body Image: What the Media and Mirror Feed Us." Throughout the program, the message is making kids realize that small practical choices in everyday life, like walking, make significant differences.

Shanequa Highsmith, who currently mentors at John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx, sums the program focus up as: "It's a lot more than just teaching about being healthy; it's about teaching them to be healthy in their own environment, so they can live it now, which matters the most."

The good news is that HealthCorps is very inexpensive. We estimate that it costs about \$1 per every year of life lived for every kid influenced by the program. As a private-public partnership, we rely on private individuals and corporations to chip in for their local schools and count on local governments to subsidize the efforts. In New York City, the City Council has provided a \$2,000,000 grant to place

programs in 26 metropolitan schools. Government leaders are appreciating that HealthCorps is good politics as well as good policy and are pushing for more rapid growth in their regions.

To learn more about the program, information is available at the website www.healthcorps.org or by telephone at 212-742-2875.