

Student pharmacists' role with caregiving youth

By Marc Watrous, RPh, PhD, and Connie Siskowski, RN, PhD

A young teen approaches the pharmacy counter. He apprehensively asks to pick up his mother's seizure medication. You assume she is waiting in the car, so you hand over the medication, and move on to take care of the next patient. However, Kevin's mom is not in the car. She is home unable to drive. Her vision is distorted and she is experiencing severe headaches. Her younger son is with her while Kevin rode his bike to the pharmacy.

School has been especially tough for Kevin recently. He worries a lot and has a hard time concentrating in school. He is always tired because his mom has been up many nights and he has been there to take care of her. Dad isn't exactly around anymore. He moves from place to place, unable to keep a job.

Kevin's grades are slipping. He has a science paper due in 2 days and the family computer is slow and they no longer have Internet access because they can no longer afford to pay for the service. Kevin wishes he had time to spend with friends. "Why me?," he often wonders.

Caregiving youth

Kevin is among the more than 1.3 million children, ages 8 to 18 years, who sacrifice their education, health, wellbeing, and childhood to provide care for family members who are ill, injured, elderly, or disabled. According to the National Alliance for Caregiving's 2005 report, *Young Caregivers in the U.S.*, more than 70% of these children care for an adult. In addition to personal care responsibilities such as bathing, feeding, toileting and assisting with mobility, most also help with household tasks

including medical and medication management.

Why are so many children in this role? It is counterintuitive: aren't adults supposed to care for children? Demographics in the United States continue to change with people living longer, more single parent households, grandparents raising grandchildren, multi-generation households, and a more culturally diverse population that believes family should be cared for at home, no matter what the circumstances. While advances in technology and home care delivery are occurring, they are not keeping pace with the needs. Combine this with deficits in health care delivery, insufficient insurance, and limited knowledge of the health care system, the care for many adults is falling through the cracks. The unfortunate outcome is that the responsibility of care is falling to their children and grandchildren.

You can make a difference

You can provide support by recognizing them as they pick up family medications or accompany a family member. When an adult is present, also include suspected youth caregivers in conversations about medication use, including the adverse effects. Provide them with simple instructions and education to help assure appropriate use and compliance.

Establish a trusting relationship when a teen picks up a prescription. Encourage them to ask questions and speak to them without judgment. Be aware that fear and uncertainty may be a big part of their life. These children may be instructed to not disclose their family health situations.

Caregiving Youth Project

The first United States Caregiving Youth Project (CYP) in partnership with schools began in Palm Beach County, FL, in 2006. Since its inception, the CYP has enrolled nearly 700 students who are able to enter in 6th grade and who are as young as 11 years of age. The CYP brings together health care, education, and the community to support these youth with services in school, out of school, and at home. Services include skills building, lunch and learn sessions, academic support including in-home tutoring, respite, linkages to community resources and activities such as an overnight camp, wellness days, field trips, and holiday celebrations.

The results have been remarkable, with 99% of youth remaining in school and graduating high school, improving their grades, and being more confident personally and in their caregiving. They learn they are not alone and feel like someone "has their back."

The CYP is under the auspices of the American Association of Caregiving Youth (www.aacy.org), the only organization in the United States solely dedicated to this otherwise hidden population. As a critical member of the health care team, student pharmacists can make a difference in the life of Kevin and many other caregiving youth, and in the health of the family member for whom they are caring.



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