

November 9, 2015

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## Program supports high school students with chronic pain

*Teens can earn extra credits by studying pain management and treatment*

EDMONTON – Alberta teenagers diagnosed with chronic pain can now earn three high school credits through a cognitive behavioural therapy class that teaches students coping techniques.

Chronic Pain 35 was approved by Alberta Education last February. Students who complete a 10-week pain management program, held at Stollery Children's Hospital, receive three credits at the Grade 12 level. The program is the first of its kind in Alberta; to date, 18 students have participated and all have received credits or are in the process of finalizing their course work.

“Courses like the Stollery’s Chronic Pain 35 program are great examples of how students, parents and teachers are innovating and developing solutions that help students reach graduation and improve their future,” says David Eggen, Minister of Education.

Kathy Reid, a nurse practitioner with Stollery Pediatric Chronic Pain Services, says students with chronic pain often struggle to accumulate sufficient high school credits to graduate with their classmates, and require summer school or online courses to get the bare minimum credits for a diploma.

“In our program at the Stollery,” says Reid, “we estimate most of our students miss at least one day of school per week, and approximately 15 to 20 per cent of our adolescents are no longer attending school on a regular basis or in person at all.”

Integrating Chronic Pain 35 into academic achievements is a creative strategy to help patients learn more about their pain. The class teaches students how to manage their pain with relaxation techniques, pace their activities, deal with mood and negative thoughts, improve their sleep and diet, cope with stress and anxiety, improve communication, develop a setback plan, and talk about a life with pain.

The chronic pain curriculum lessons were developed and are delivered by a pediatric chronic pain clinic psychologist and nurse practitioner. Courses are taught at the hospital or in participants’ communities and schools via Telehealth videoconferencing technology, giving all Alberta high school students diagnosed with chronic pain the opportunity to benefit from the program.

“Chronic pain can have a major impact on adolescent social development and school functioning,” says Reid. “It is critical that adolescents be provided with the opportunity to continue to learn despite experiencing pain. Having a class filled with students who can relate to each other’s chronic pain has also led to friendship and peer support that extends beyond the classroom.”

Reid has been leading the class for the past seven years but, until recently, the decision whether to award high school credits rested with school administration.

Chronic Pain 35 students have to attend all the sessions, complete weekly homework, and demonstrate their learning with a final project that demonstrates their scientific knowledge related to pain; their understanding and engagement in treatment strategies; and their willingness to advocate for themselves.

Earning three extra credits means a lot to Bailey Voltner, 17, who is looking forward to being able to graduate high school with her friends this year.

“The course and the credits are great, but what helped me the most was meeting people my age who have the same problems with pain that I do,” says Voltner. “Your teachers or friends try to be sympathetic, but you feel like no one really understands what you are going through. Being in a room with other teenagers who can relate to you made me realize I am not alone, and the course has motivated me to deal with my obstacles in a different way.”

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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