Weeklong Fair Is Cost-Effective Patient Education

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SAN FRANCISCO — Want to provide a low-cost, king-sized dose of patient education? Just invite your entire town to a weeklong, food-filled health fair.

That's what Thomas Weida, M.D., did. And to hear him tell it, the effort not only succeeded in bringing a big portion of the local population past his portals, "it was just a whole lot of fun, too."

Though some family physicians might consider back-to-back days of health presentations, information booths, and refreshment provisions a tall order, Dr. Weida said it was "a piece of cake."

The health fair was a simple-to-assemble community service that got him a whole lot more patients and a huge load of professional satisfaction.

"And I am an introvert," he asserted.

Dr. Weida, professor of family and community medicine at the Pennsylvania State College of Medicine in Hershey, shared his health-fair experience during a conference on patient education sponsored by the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine.

The fair was held several years ago, when he had a successful practice in Rothsville, Pa., a town of about 2,000. In his corner of Pennsylvania, Dr. Weida became concerned about lifestyle factor—obesity and smoking, in particular—and decided to tackle the problem in an outreach program that would entice everyone.

"What we need to do is hold a fair for a whole week," he announced to his office manager, who looked like she was going to faint. "I resuscitated her, and then I explained it," he joked.

He sought out other local health care professionals—pharmacists, dentists, opticians, and others—and asked them to contribute to the cost of putting on the fair. "We got almost total buy-in," he said.

Then he wrote a letter to the five major insurers in the area, suggesting that each become an event partner by contributing $1,000. Two sent a check, one wanted to provide ice cream instead of cash, and another suggested the company do on-site cholesterol screening during the fair.

One weekend morning was devoted to cholesterol awareness, with serologic screenings and a tasty, chef-created low-fat breakfast.

"That was fine with me," Dr. Weida said. "You have to be flexible in these things."

Next he told about 20 pharmaceutical representatives they could rent a booth at the fair for $300, and to guarantee foot traffic, he would "let" them occupy a food station, where they could dole out edible treats right along with their product information.

"I sort of felt sorry for the guy at the coffee urn. He didn't get that many people," Dr. Weida recalled. "But when I told him I felt badly, he said, 'I wanted to be here to support this.' "

Each day, a different event unfolded, thanks to volunteerism from local professionals.

One night, a lawyer offered advice on living wills. Another evening, a physical therapist lectured on injury-preventing exercise. One weekend morning was devoted to cholesterol awareness, with serologic screenings and a low-fat breakfast.

"A local restaurant chef did the breakfast—the best of its kind I ever had: French toast made with egg whites and baked apple mixture on top," Dr. Weida recalled at the conference, also sponsored by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The weekend also featured a stand-up comedian (laughter as good medicine); a psychologist who had a device to detect anxiety—it worked on the same principle as the "mood ring," explained Dr. Weida—and an appearance by the crime-fighting canine McGruff (who held forth on the importance of bike helmets).

The health fair was such a success that Dr. Weida found himself congratulated throughout town, the recipient of honks and hand waves. The phone nearly rang off the hook with patients making new appointments, he said.

Best of all, the health fair cost him little, except in the substantial time he took to help organize it. "It was tremendous bang for our buck," he said. ■