Cancer Curriculum Initiative: Summer 2013
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My beginning with the Cancer Curriculum Initiative began long before this summer, back in 2011. Sara and I approached Dr. Wilstermann about wanting to do some work with cancer and children. She invited us to join her in an initiative to create science-based cancer curriculum for K-12 students in the greater West Michigan area.

The issues we ran into most with existing cancer curriculums is that they often only addressed the psychological effects of cancer on children, whether they were the patient or someone close to them was affected. Students were still left in the dark on exactly what cancer was, how it was caused, and whether or not they could be at risk; all of these things make students nervous, confused, and loaded with false information.

Our first task was to see what children already knew about cancer; false or not. We were able to attend Dr. Wilstermann’s children’s Flex Week at Grand Rapids Christian School and use some of our pre-made lesson plans that were targeted for K-2nd and 3rd-5th grade students. Our lesson plans included large group discussions on what students already knew, what they wanted to learn, and what they learned at the end of the day; demonstrations analogous to cancer processes, and activities about how to help those they knew who had cancer. The students and teachers were extremely receptive to the lessons and gave us great feedback on what could be added.

One of the main additions after talking with the teachers was teacher resource packets that included background information on the topic in the lesson (i.e. – leukemia, brain cancer, treatments, etc.), links to online and print resources, and key learning goals for each lesson. This is what I have been working on mostly this summer, along with lesson plan revisions. Along with the lesson plans, Sara (an education major) has been assigning Michigan education standards that fit in order for teachers to better fit them into their classroom learning and still meet state requirements.

CCI has not only been a great opportunity to work with a Calvin professor, but also to solidify my goal of attending medical school to pursue pediatric oncology. Knowing that cancer affects children so small and that often they are uncertain about what the terminology and treatments mean is a big push for me to educate children early on so that misconceptions and myths don’t worry them more than they should.

This project has also taught me a lot about working in a team, taking another’s perspective in learning and teaching, and understanding a topic well enough to explain it to others (that’s when you know you understand the best).

In May, Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital picked up our curriculum to use as their own when visiting patient’s classrooms after diagnosis. They also realized the lapse in the scientific understanding in the classroom and were impressed by our lesson plans targeted for specific age groups on specific subjects. We have been working with them to appropriately meet their needs for lesson plans, lesson plan topics, and resource needs.

We have hopes of creating a website where educators can access all the lesson plans, teacher resources, and outside links.

I look forward to where CCI will go next and how it will grow to help more than just Helen DeVos patients and West Michigan students.