Cancer Curriculum Initiative 2015

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Cancer is undeniably prevalent in the lives of adults and children alike. When children are impacted by cancer, they are likely to experience anxiety, misconceptions, and uncertainty. Educating students about cancer in an age-appropriate manner corrects misconceptions and allows children to develop useful coping skills to help relieve their anxieties. Further, focusing on the science of cancer and introducing children to commonly used terms, such as chemotherapy, gives them context for what is happening and why.

To assess currently available educational resources and needs, the CancerEd team, presently consisting of Professor Wilstermann and I, conducted a review of existing K-12 cancer curricula along with a review of primary literature. Our curricular review exposed a gap in resources that focuses on the science of cancer, especially for younger children, as well as a lack of cancer knowledge among high school students. Materials tailored to the emotional and social aspects of a cancer diagnosis and cancer prevention were more common.

To address the identified challenges and gaps, we have worked to create a comprehensive library of cancer curriculum resources. Our goal is to provide teachers and hospital staff with quality educational materials that can be used to engage students in classroom activities pertaining to cancer. To ensure our efforts are meeting the needs of both children and educators, we created two surveys intended to answer questions such as: what resources (specific topics and materials) do parents (or caregivers) and teachers need to help them teach children about cancer? We plan to revise existing materials and develop new lessons based on survey responses. To further ensure that our materials are meeting needs, we have been in conversation with staff at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.

To date, our primary focus has been creating curriculum materials for kindergarten through fifth grade students. Currently, our lesson topics include: Cells and Cell Division, What is Cancer, What Causes Cancer, Metastasis, Leukemia, Brain Cancer, Lung Cancer, Treatment Options, Bone Marrow Transplants, Supporting Those with Cancer, and Prevention. Because we understand that there is a significant developmental difference between kindergarten and fifth grade students, each topic includes two lessons: one designed for K-2 students and one designed for 3-5 students. Each lesson plan includes everything an educator needs to teach the lesson including: teacher standards, supplementary materials, and additional resources. We purposefully created these lessons to be hands-on and inquiry-based to promote retention of learning objectives and evoke interest in science and health. We have also gathered outside resources to supplement the cancer lessons including cancer related books with discussion questions, cell division and chemotherapy videos, as well as a links to national cancer organizations.

Personally, working with Professor Wilstermann on the cancer curriculum project has been a blessing as well as a rich learning experience. I am honored to have played a part in the creation of this crucial piece of elementary education. As a nursing student passionate about age-appropriate health education, this project affirmed my desire to continue researching and developing health education materials. In the future, I hope to continue filling gaps in health education by empowering individuals and their communities with engaging cancer, diabetes, and obesity materials.