Press release : 2013 : 11 : 22 : Premed Club program at All Children's Hospital provides comfort to cystic fibrosis patients

Tom Scherberger

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Erik Richardson had thought about a career in medicine but wasn’t sure until he went on a mission trip to a health clinic in Guatemala three years ago.

“Being able to help a child one on one is really what made me want to be a doctor,” said Richardson, a USF St. Petersburg senior majoring in biology who hopes to attend the USF Morsani College of Medicine next year. “Up until then I never had interacted with a patient. I discovered how rewarding it was.”

The experience inspired him to start Premed Pals, a volunteer program of the student Premed Club that sends USFSP students to All Children’s Hospital to work with young cystic fibrosis patients. He had worked as a volunteer in the hospital’s outpatient pharmacy and wanted to
create volunteer opportunities for Premed Club members to give them experiences similar to what he had in Guatemala.

The student volunteers, most of whom hope to become doctors, learn how to interact with real patients in a real hospital setting. And the patients, who range in age from infants to teenagers, look forward to the visits. The patients’ families also appreciate getting a break.

Cystic fibrosis is a chronic disease affecting the lungs and digestive system. About 30,000 children and adults in the United States are affected by the inherited disease, according to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. The disease clogs the lungs and can lead to life-threatening infections.

The patients at All Children’s stay in isolation for up to two weeks at a time for treatment a couple of times a year to clear their lungs. “They call it ‘tune-ups,’” said Richardson, president of the Premed Club. “They get bored sitting in their room.”

The student volunteers will do whatever they can to take a patient’s mind off things, said Everett Rogers, the volunteer coordinator for the Premed club. They play Legos, board games, video games or just watch TV — whatever the patients want to do. “I’ve sat there for an hour watching Dragon Ball Z just to be with them,” said Rogers. “We’ll get on the floor and play dolls with them. It’s been pretty incredible for me.”

Richardson agrees. “To get them up and out of bed and participating in these activities is so rewarding,” he said.

Frank Biafora, dean of the USFSP College of Arts and Sciences, praised the volunteer efforts. “These students are great examples of community leadership at its best,” he said. “They are not only helping these vulnerable children, they are learning invaluable lessons that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.”

Hospital officials say the students have been a great asset for the cystic fibrosis program. “Erik is a person with a lot of passion and compassion, and his dedication in putting this program together with all the demands on his time is very impressive,” said Brittany Nelms, All Children’s Hospital Volunteer Services Coordinator. “He started as a volunteer and now he’s coordinating the whole program, so that other USFSP premed students can participate and help give a lift to our CF patients. We really appreciate everything he’s done.”

The program started in June with 16 volunteers working twice a week. It has been so successful Richardson hopes to grow it with more volunteers covering more days of the week.

Because of the risk of infection, each volunteer must be specially trained in sterile techniques before they can begin working with patients. They learn when and where to use surgical masks and what patients can and cannot touch. They must wear sterile gowns when they are with patients. And the patients cannot hang out with each other.
“They’re kids and they don’t like being in a room for two weeks at a time,” said Rogers, a junior who started at USF St. Petersburg but transferred to USF Tampa this year to pursue a chemical engineering degree. “It’s kind of rough. They get bored sitting in the room.” The patients are always happy to see the USFSP student volunteers.

“They love it and you can see it in their faces,” Richardson said. But the premed students also learn a sobering reality: They are not miracle workers. “Some days you feel bad for the kids,” he said. “Other times you feel so rewarded.”

“You have to accept that you can’t always do something for somebody,” Rogers added. But that’s just part of the learning process, he said. In the end, everyone wins.

“It helps the hospital, it helps us, it helps the kids,” Rogers said.

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