

Kathleen King and Raquel Ramírez Ruiz: Diabetes forum puts patients front and center

By Kathleen King and Raquel Ramírez Ruiz

On a recent sunny spring morning, the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust opened its doors to what has become an annual event -- a regional forum on diabetes that brings new perspectives on the disease to health care providers, researchers, patients and local officials. Co-sponsored by the Health Trust and the Regional Diabetes Collaborative, the forum drew more than 70 representatives from over 30 health and social service organizations across Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties.

Patients with diabetes are always a feature of the forum's discussions, but this year they were a focus. Alan Glaseroff, a physician from Humboldt County who has diabetes, opened the day with an overview of why patient self-management is the key to controlling diabetes.

Dr. Glaseroff pointed to the many barriers that create an obstacle course for patients trying to control their diabetes -- lack of information, social isolation, a lack of skills, anxiety, and even guilt about having diabetes. The physician's role, he explained, is not to lecture patients about what they should know and do, but to listen to them and help them overcome these barriers.

A panel of health educators and nurses echoed Dr. Glaseroff's observations. Patients lack confidence in their ability to make changes, face misunderstandings about specific treatments, encounter enormous financial and transportation barriers as they seek care, and often face not only language and literacy challenges, but additional ones posed by the use of medical jargon.

A group of patients then told their side of the story, relating how they were able to overcome such challenges.

A young woman who had watched her grandmother die far too young from complications of diabetes feared the same fate was inevitable for her, until a physician helped her see that she could choose a healthier life and a different outcome.

A mother, sitting at the podium with her young daughter in her lap, relived the fear she had felt at her daughter's initial diagnosis, and the difficulties negotiating care for her daughter through the school system.

Another woman confessed that her Type 2 diabetes diagnosis, instead of making her feel less healthy, had in fact saved her life -- because it motivated her to adopt healthier habits that will extend her life, as well as her enjoyment of it.

Hilary Seligman, M.D., ended the day with a practical approach that clinicians can take to help patients gain hope and confidence so that they can adopt healthier behaviors. Her "prescription" is a patient-generated action plan that proposes small-scale, incremental changes. For example, instead of "I will control my blood sugar," a patient might say, "I will switch one can of soda next week for diet soda, on three different days." Dr. Seligman then follows up with her patients, encouraging them when they've made progress and helping them revise their goal, if necessary.

For patients and providers who couldn't attend the forum, local resources are available. Contact the Regional Diabetes Collaborative at 763-6445 or pvhealthtrust.org for a list of community-based resources, including diabetes education and self-management programs.

"Achieving small goals is better than not achieving big goals," Dr. Seligman reminds. And by placing the patient at the center of care, small changes often lead to bigger, more sustained ones down the road -- a lesson that providers and patients alike can take to heart.

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