



PRESS RELEASE

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U of A students give inner-city kids free vision tests through volunteer iCare initiative

(Edmonton) Students from the medical, science, arts and education faculties at the University of Alberta are giving free eye exams to school-aged children in Edmonton's inner city between now and April.

The iCare Initiative University of Alberta (ICIUA) was officially formed in 2010 as a volunteer group, but has been in existence since 2008 – previously operating under a different name. The initiative has three primary objectives – to educate school-aged children about vision problems, screen young children in an effort to prevent long-term vision issues and fundraise.

Since 2008, U of A student volunteers have screened 1,000 children in Grades 1 to 3 at 12 local schools. The volunteers usually visit one school each month between September – April each school year. The university students start off with a brief, fun PowerPoint presentation to teach kids about the signs of vision problems, such as blurry vision or needing to squint or sit near the front in order to see.

Then the children get screened at various stations by looking at an eye chart, and the visual acuity results for each eye are given to children immediately. Volunteers also check off a box on a form that is sent home to parents noting whether the child has good vision or poor vision, and the suggestion is made to all parents to take their children for a professional eye exam. The form is sent home to parents, noting all children in Alberta are entitled to one free eye exam every year.

“We keep things very simple for the kids, talking to them about what their eyes are used for, what helps their eyes and what hurts their eyes,” says Ravin Bastiampillai, 3rd-year medical student and president of the iCare initiative. “Ultimately, our goal is not to prescribe anything or make a diagnosis; our goal is to identify children who have a vision problem using a very simple screening tool, and to let parents know that eye exams are free for anyone under the age of 18 in Alberta.”

The students usually screen between 30-50 kids at each school. Of those, there are usually up to five children at each school who are noted as having high-risk vision problems – meaning they need to wear glasses or may have a more serious problem such as “lazy eye” that can be corrected if caught at an early age, says Bastiampillai.

Bastiampillai decided to start this volunteer initiative after he travelled to India in 2006 with a U.S.-based volunteer organization called Unite for Sight, where he was part of a group that conducted visual acuity exams for more than 1,000 locals in the neighbouring villages around Chennai, India. He thought there was a need for a similar effort in Edmonton's inner city to help improve vision for school-aged children.

“That trip spurred an interest in vision care for me and taught me that interventions are important, not only in places abroad, but also in places right here at home.”

This year, iCare plans to compile some research statistics on their initiative by following up with parents a few weeks after the screening to see how many parents took their children to an optometrist’s office. The overall goal is to gather data and present their findings to Alberta school boards.

Eric Martin, a nursing student who is the PR rep and chair of the iCare initiative, said he is pleased at the great responses they receive from every school they are involved with. He spearheads the school screenings and is the main liaison with school boards.

“This is a unique program in Edmonton and we are encouraged by both the active roles that principals and vice-principals have in regards to the event and the co-operation from teachers, students and families which all contribute to more than 80 per cent of kids taking part.”

Joan Carr, Superintendent of Edmonton Catholic Schools, added: “The Edmonton Catholic School District values the program offered by the U of A medical, arts and education students. The proactive eye-health screening and education mirror our overall philosophy of giving students the supports they need to succeed and reach their full potential.”

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