Keeping kids from 'old man disease'

SCOPE looks to help youths fight diabetes

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Up until about 30 years ago, in the 1980s, Type 2 diabetes was considered a disease of older adults, and was rarely seen in children.

Today, with one in four Canadian children diagnosed as obese or dangerously overweight, the rates of this 'old man's disease' are soaring among those under 18.

For all these reasons, she is helping to lead a prevention and education pilot project in Abbotsford and Prince George, called SCOPE, or Sustainable Childhood Obesity Prevention through Community Engagement.

SCOPE is modeled after similar efforts that have cut diabetes rates in Europe and the United States, where kids are encouraged to "eat smart, play hard," as in the EPODE, Healthy Living Cambridge and Shape Up Somerville models.

Locally, Amed will work with Laura Loudon of Healthy Abbotsford, who will co-ordinate the SCOPE program for the city.

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– Dr. Shazhan Amed

Even worse, researchers say overweight kids are developing secondary complications that include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, liver and kidney disease and even cancer by the time they reach adolescence or young adulthood.

These are the findings of Dr. Shazhan Amed, a pediatric endocrinologist at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver, who recently led a national study that looked at children with Type 2 diabetes.

"Almost 40 per cent of the children with Type 2 diabetes had at least one other chronic condition by the time they were 13, 15 years old," said Amed.

Of those children in the study with Type 2 diabetes, 95 per cent were obese.

"That tells us that obesity is the single most important factor [leading to diabetes], and it's completely preventable," she said.

The study, published in the April edition of *Diabetes Care*, also indicates how quickly the rates of diabetes have changed in Canada. From almost no cases among children in the 1980s, Amed said since the 2000s, there is now "a minimum of 113 new cases diagnosed each year."

But while she counsels her young patients with Type 2 diabetes and their families about diet and exercise, she feels her role is limited.

"As much as I try to help . . . I feel quite helpless. I don't know [the patient's] context, their environment, what barriers they face," she said.

The first planning session was on Wednesday, with 30 representatives from Fraser Health, the city and the school district, Abbotsford Community Services and other organizations.

"SCOPE is led by the community. It brings together people with a wide range of skills and knowledge, leaders who are already working to improve the health of children here," said Amed.

The planning exercise was to identify positive elements already in the community, and the gaps and barriers to healthy living that can be addressed as the program develops an action plan.

"Abbotsford already has a lot of things going on, and we'll build on those strengths," said Amed.

The next step is to inform and include people from the Abbotsford groups that have a high risk of developing diabetes, such as new immigrants, South Asians and First Nations, in forming the plan.

The project was granted $300,000 from Child Health BC for the three-year pilot program for both Abbotsford and Prince George, although Amed is looking to keep the diabetes prevention program going far beyond that time period.

"This is not something we can solve in a doctor's office. This is something that has to happen in the community," she said.

◗ For more on this issue, read Paul Fontaine's column *Simple cure for obese kids* on page A8.

– CHRISTINA TOTH/TIMES

Dr. Shazhan Amed, left and Laura Loudon of Healthy Abbotsford will lead a SCOPE diabetes prevention pilot project in Abbotsford.

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