

Career *of the* Month

Summer 2006

Science in the Workplace

Diabetes Educator

Our bodies need glucose (sugar) for energy. Sugar is transported through the body by way of the blood. Ideally, the pancreas releases the hormone insulin to take sugar from the blood into the cells. But what if the body does not produce or effectively use insulin? Sugar, with nowhere else to go, stays in the blood and cells do not get fuel. As a result, blood sugar levels increase and diabetes is diagnosed.

Diabetes can develop at any age and lead to a lot of health problems. But with the help of a diabetes educator—such as Donna Rice—individuals can learn the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to gain control of diabetes and have long, healthy lives.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not make or correctly use insulin. There are three main types of this chronic condition. With *Type 1* diabetes, usually diagnosed in children to young adults, the pancreas does not produce insulin. *Type 2* diabetes develops when the body's cells ignore insulin or the pancreas does not produce enough insulin. *Type 2* can develop at any age, and the chances of developing this most common form of diabetes are increased by obesity and inactivity. Some women develop *gestational diabetes* during pregnancy. This type of diabetes typically goes away after childbirth, but increases the chances of that woman developing *Type 2* later on in life.

Describe this job.

If left unmanaged, diabetes can lead to a slew of health problems

in the kidneys, eyes, nerves, gums, teeth, and most critically, the heart. This is where diabetes educators come in—we are professionals from various healthcare fields that share in common education and training in the biological and social sciences, communication, counseling, education, and diabetes care. Diabetes educators deal with both the prevention and management of diabetes. We need an in-depth knowledge of science to assess, identify, and teach diabetes self-management goals, which vary by individual and diabetes type. Diabetes educators give patients a combination of science knowledge, coping mechanisms, and problem-solving tools to enable them to take charge, self-manage, and live well with diabetes. Patients learn about the diabetes disease process and how to prevent, detect, and treat complications through eating well, exercising, monitoring blood sugar, injecting insulin, and taking medication for example.

Advice for students?

Diabetes is escalating at great speeds and we do not have enough professionals in the area of diabetes care. The job market is wide open. Diabetes educators come from a range of backgrounds, including registered nurses, dietitians, pharmacists, and exercise physiologists. With this in mind, students are encouraged to pursue a post-high school education in any field of healthcare that interests them. To specialize in diabetes care, students should become familiar with the further academic, professional, and experiential criteria needed to be-

come a certified diabetes educator (CDE). Meeting the additional care criteria to become a CDE is not required of diabetes educators, but it is encouraged.

How did you choose this field?

I have both a personal and a professional reason for becoming a diabetes educator. Personally, I have several family members who are dealing with diabetes. Professionally, I have a love for medicine and teaching, and I believe we can help fight the war on diabetes in the United States through healthy living. We have a lot of work to do in schools and in communities to increase the knowledge base around exercise and nutrition. I have a passion for nursing and education because I see great outcomes from my efforts. The challenges are considerable but the rewards are even greater.

—By Megan Sullivan

Bonus Points

Education:

R.N., B.S. in Nursing, M.B.A., CDE

On the web:

- ◆ American Association of Diabetes Educators (www.aadenet.org)
- ◆ American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org)

Related careers:

Nurses, physicians, mental health professionals, podiatrists, optometrists