

Teacher Wellness Workshops a big win during Covid

As teachers face the ongoing pressures of parent concerns, challenging student behaviours and routines and the drive from the education department to achieve better academic outcomes, maintaining physical and mental wellness has become a key focus area.

Dr Sandra Pretorius, Programme Manager for the Health in Action (HIA) Programme run by INMED South Africa, says the prevention and management of chronic lifestyle diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, as well as mental wellbeing, are not possible without changes in everyday behaviour.

With that principle in mind, the HIA teams hosted a series of teacher wellness workshops designed to help participants become aware of and change the bad habits that are making them ill. “It is all about learning how to take the first steps toward long-term wellness through making positive changes in nutrition and physical activity habits,” says Pretorius. “Teachers, after all, ultimately serve as models of behaviour for their students.”

In total, the teams have led eight workshops for more than 300 teachers in Motherwell and Zwile in Port Elizabeth and Diepsloot, Soweto and Orange Farm in the greater Johannesburg area so far this year. Pretorius said the sessions also emphasized the importance of physical wellness and the risks of lifestyle diseases. The training was eye-opening for a lot of teachers. For the first time, I learned that I have hypertension, which I also learned how to manage,” said one participant. “I am very grateful that I attended this wellness training!”

In appreciation of these teachers’ active participation and commitment to their own wellness, as well as acting as agents of change in their respective schools, INMED South Africa provided each school with a cash voucher. Refalletse Primary School used its voucher to purchase healthy snacks for students as part of its Healthy Lifestyle Initiative. “I wish to send a token of appreciation for the support we have received from INMED since we first joined the Health in Action programme,” said Principal Sphiwo Mbokane. “For the entire week of our initiative, we were able to promote healthy eating because of the vouchers we received from the workshop.”

Reshomile Primary School in Diepsloot used its vouchers to buy food to supplement the school meals. Teacher Patience Maponya commented, “We are so grateful. Our learners were so excited today to get a great lunch of chicken stew, samp (a corn and bean dish) and pumpkin. Thanks to INMED and Mondelēz for the vouchers—they really put a smile on our children.”

Pudumo Primary School in Orange Farm used its voucher to organize an honorary lunch for their teachers, at which they shared information from the workshop with those who could not attend. "A big thanks to both INMED and Mondelēz for the voucher," said Deputy Principal Phumzile Thulo. "It may seem small, but for others it really meant a lot, as we were able to honour our staff who had a very difficult year."

The results of INMED's long-running Health in Action programme in partnership with the Mondelēz International Foundation are remarkable, despite the challenges of the COVID. "Our teams have proved to be creative, flexible and adaptable during the pandemic and managed to reach more than 10 000 students each week," notes Pretorius. "When we are not in the schools working with students with our Break Time Buddies, we are able to work in the communities, encouraging more active lifestyles amongst parents and children as well." In the last quarter, for example, INMED's HIA teams in Port Elizabeth, with the support of our university partners, carried out twice daily 30-minute sessions of participatory health and fitness education and reached more than 8000 participants in this area alone.

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"The prevalence of hypertension, overweight, and obesity appears to have increased since 1998. Based on the body mass index (BMI) score, 68% of women and 31% of men are overweight or obese. Of major concern is the high prevalence of severe obesity among South Africa women. One in five women has a BMI ≥ 35.0 , placing her in the severely obese category. 46% percent of women and 44% of men are hypertensive based on their systolic blood pressure being above 140mmHg, their diastolic blood pressure being above 90 mmHg or taking antihypertensive medication, according to NDoH, 2017.

Reference: National Department of Health, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and ICF. 2017. South African Demographic and Health Survey 2016: Key indicators. Pretoria, South Africa, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: NDoH, Stats SA, SAMRC and ICF.

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