

Health minister visits students learning CPR

High schools across province participate in program to nurture good lifestyle habits

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The Gazette

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Quebec Health Minister Philippe Couillard eyed the teenage students who were sitting cross-legged on the gymnasium floor.

"Any of you smoke?" he asked. "Raise your hands."

The students fidgeted, and some avoided the minister's gaze. None raised their hands.

"Of course, none of you would dare admit," he said, laughing.

Couillard, a neurosurgeon, visited Ecole secondaire Honore Mercier in St. Henri yesterday to watch the students demonstrate cardiopulmonary resuscitation on mannequins.

As part of a program being implemented in high schools across the province, the students not only learn CPR but good lifestyle habits - like staying away from cigarettes to avoid a heart attack. Grade 8 students learn CPR during four one-hour classes and some schools offer refresher courses in higher grades.

During the demonstration, 16-year-old Sandra Boateng knelt before a mannequin, squeezed its nose and breathed air into its mouth. Then she hand-pumped the chest, counting up to 15 for each compression.

"I wouldn't want to be in a situation where I wouldn't know how to use CPR. I would find that very distressing," she said.

The Grade 10 student knows first-hand the dangers of cardiac disease. Her grandfather had complained of chest pain and shortness of breath a few months ago.

"He almost had a heart attack," she recounted. "He had to undergo a bypass operation."

The training and mannequins are provided by the ACT High School CPR Program, founded in 1994. Since then, 700,000 students across Canada have learned CPR. The students have saved the lives of scores of heart-attack victims, as well as those who have suffered from strokes, drug overdoses and asthmatic emergencies.

The non-profit ACT Foundation expanded the service to Quebec in 1997 in a pilot project involving a handful of Montreal schools. Quebec has been much slower to embrace the program, compared with Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba, where CPR is part of the school curriculum.

This year, Quebec contributed \$300,000 to the program, while the corporate sector donated \$500,000. The foundation hopes to raise an additional \$400,000 so it can set up programs in 250 high schools. At present, 50 schools are teaching students CPR.

Studies have shown that eight of 10 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur at home. Although CPR can boost a victim's chances of survival by almost four times, the technique is used in only 15 per cent of cases.

Couillard said he has performed CPR many times - the last time about five years ago in an intensive-care unit.

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