

Title: Shoot for Safety: A Hepatitis C Awareness Network for Youth in Cairo, Egypt

School: Washington University in St. Louis

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The basic premise of our hepatitis C project in Egypt was to recruit and train a core of 20-30 Egyptian college students to spread the message of hepatitis C awareness to their communities and social circles as “peer educators”. We hoped to then use the mobilization of these youth to create a hepatitis C awareness initiative in the country that would be both refreshing and long-lasting. Our previous experience in working with hepatitis C awareness consisted of 1 year of working with the Missouri/Kansas chapter of the American Liver Foundation to raise awareness of hepatitis C amongst high school students in St. Louis, Missouri. Building on this previous experience, we applied for a \$10,000 grant from the Katherine Wasserman Davis foundation, which we were awarded in March.

Months before our grant application was submitted, we began developing instructional materials that were used to train youth peer hepatitis C educators as well as the production of the printed informational media that was distributed to our peer educators. We developed a pamphlet which discussed general information about the disease as well as measures that youth can take to avoid contraction and transmission. Our project material was developed by working with our previously developed materials, as well as material supplied to us by Missouri/Kansas Chapter of the American Liver Foundation.

To find students in Egypt who would be interested in participating in our project, we used the social networking website “Facebook.” Facebook is an excellent tool because millions of college students all over the world use it and check it on a regular basis. We created a “Facebook group” detailing the specifics of our project and invited people to join. This group served as a nexus for recruitment of students in Egypt, as well as the dissemination of project specifications to our volunteers. We recruited students ages 18-24 off the “Egypt network; over 50 students are currently members of the group, although some individuals have fallen out of contact. We communicated with students during the next few months to discuss their role in our project as well as to coordinate scheduling and logistics. Over the next few months, we also continued to develop our project materials, including our pamphlets, presentations, and workshops.

Arriving in Cairo in mid-July, we first gave a presentation about hepatitis C awareness and prevention at a drug rehabilitation retreat farm in Wadi El-Natroun, outside Cairo. Although this part of the project was outside the scope of our initial proposal (focused on youth), we were presented with this opportunity by our contacts in Egypt, and it proved to be an outstanding opportunity to speak to a diverse audience comprised of social workers and doctors as well as recovering addicts about hepatitis C awareness. Answering questions from audience members affected by the disease (either themselves or a close family member) was particularly rewarding, and helped us to understand how profound an impact this disease had on peoples’ lives. Additionally, we also included a second component to our presentation, specifically intended for community officials and social workers who were interested in raising awareness of various public health causes in their communities. Using our project as an example, we showed them how they could harness the popularity, accessibility and robustness of online social networks as an engine for social/public health awareness.

The next part of our project entailed working with university students that we had recruited and been communicating with for the previous 3 months. Through a series of discussions and

workshops, we not only educated these students about hepatitis C, but also came to understand this epidemic within the context of Egyptian culture. Through these discussions, we sought not only to educate them about the disease, but also to engage in discussions to understand the disease within the context of Egyptian culture and to prepare them to take action in their communities, and most importantly, empower other youth to spread the awareness message in the same way that we empowered them. We ended up learning quite a bit from our discussions, and have since decided to incorporate much of what we learned into revised versions of our materials. We also provided our volunteers with hepatitis C awareness “bracelets” (generous gift from the Missouri/Kansas American Liver Foundation) which they could give to other young adults during the course of their initiatives.

However, a crucial part of our project was the continued action of the students that we trained, to train other young Egyptians. With the help of our students, we forged a partnership with the largest youth public health program in the country, Dance4Life Egypt. Dance4Life is nationwide youth movement based in college campuses and high schools across the country that aims to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS. After discussions with some of the kids involved with the project, we realized that there was a substantial overlap in the audiences we were targeting, and drew up a strategy for providing an integrated Hepatitis C/HIV education program. Our partnership with this program opens up opportunities for our initiative to be spread to thousands of young adults across the country, helping to make our Hepatitis C initiative a permanent fixture in Egypt. We also have arranged to work with Egyptian branches of UNAIDS and UNICEF to augment our outreach efforts. Also of note, we have been in communication with a community health organization based in Canberra, Australia that is working on hepatitis C awareness. They have expressed interest in our youth-focused project, and we currently are discussing ways that we can help them with hepatitis C efforts in their community. To prepare for the wider visibility of our project, we have changed the name of our organization from “Shoot for Safety” to “Don’t Worry, Beat HepC!” and hope to create a website for our organization in the next year.

Our involvement and execution of this project has been a tremendously enriching and fulfilling experience. However our project was not without its share of surprises and unforeseen circumstances. We communicated regularly with our contacts in Egypt as we were designing, but no amount of research here in the United States could have substituted for actually being immersed in Egyptian culture. Our experiences led us to act substantially modify many of our materials, despite all of our prior preparation. As our project enters a new and exciting phase, we will continue to oversee its development and activity; however, our greatest wish was that we had more time to spend in the country, not only to more fully internalize the Egyptian culture, but also because being present in the country would have been a particularly special experience.

Overall, our project was very successful and all goals were not only met, but the results have exceeded our expectations. In the coming months, we look forward to following the progress of our first group of volunteers, and to continue to oversee the further expansion of our youth hepatitis C awareness initiative.

