

Stamping out tobacco addiction in Clay County

By Debra W. Buehn
Correspondent

Armed with a new three-year grant, the Tobacco Free Partnership of Clay County is all fired up about snuffing out tobacco use among Clay County's youth.

"I'm incredibly optimistic about Clay County," said Barry Hummel, M.D., known by many throughout the state for his work with Quit Doc Research and Education Foundation.

Quit Doc has been awarded community-based tobacco prevention grants in 11 of Florida's 67 counties, with Clay County being one of them, and its goal is to continue the work of the tobacco-free partnership that has been going on in the county for the past several years, said Hummel.

"Our goal is to reduce youth tobacco use," Hummel said.

Hummel and several others from the Coral Springs-based Quit Doc met with Clay County tobacco-free advocates at the Fleming Island Library Sept. 20 in a kick-off meeting for the 2012-2013 year. Hummel gave an overview of Quit Doc and its mission to reduce tobacco use in Clay County.

For Hummel, a pediatrician, the focus is all about reaching out to young people and making sure they never start using tobacco products.

"It's a pediatric health epidemic," Hummel said.

But it's often not seen that way, since the effects of tobacco use often aren't exposed until many years down the road. While some 85 percent of smokers start out as minors, the results of their choices aren't seen until they are far into their adult years, when one in two will die early from a tobacco-related illness, Hummel said. The point is to take charge of things in those early years, he said.

"If you really want to make a dent in this, you have to reduce youth use. That's where you have to take a stand," said Hummel who, along with his associates, works to not only change tobacco policies, but social norms as well. As Hummel puts it, you can make a policy that prohibits smoking in parks, but you should also make sure you're putting out information that gives a person the knowledge to decide not to smoke there in the first place.

But cigarettes are not the only issue, Hummel said. Other types of tobacco products, such as cigars and smokeless tobacco items, including "spit" or "dip" products are problematic.

"Dip is where [the tobacco industry] are going because there's no second-hand smoke," Hummel said.

To reach their young audience, the smokeless products are often packaged to look like candy, and even placed with candy-type items in stores. That's something Hummel hopes to have a huge effect on, by encouraging people – especially young people – to approach their local governments and demand that such products are properly regulated.

"I'm going to stamp out dip. We're going to be 'dip-centric,'" Hummel said.

One of the reasons Quit Doc chose Clay County as one of its focus areas was due to an increase in tobacco products, particularly in area high schools, from 2008-2010. But new statistics that were just released on Sept. 24 showed Clay County High Schools were doing much better for 2010-2012, with the use of smokeless products down from 12.3 percent for 2008-2010 to 8.3 percent for 2010-2012. However, that's still above the current state average of 5.6 percent.

"We want to be below the state average," Hummel said.

One of the best places to fight tobacco use is in the middle schools, where Clay County has been quite successful in its anti-tobacco campaign, said Hummel. If you can reach young people before they enter high school, you've done a lot to win the battle, he said.

"Eighth grade is the linchpin," he said, adding that the work that has been done in the middle schools has obviously carried over to the high schools.

SWAT teams – Students Working Against Tobacco – are among those helping in the tobacco-free efforts here, said Heather Sciartelli, the Clay County SWAT program coordinator. The teams are made up of young people from schools to organizations such as Scouts or 4-H Clubs. There is also an all-county organization that anyone can join, she said. Anyone interested can contact her at hsciartelli@quitdoc.com.

The goal, she said, is "...to help local policy makers and business owners know that tobacco-free policies help save money and lives."

For anyone interested in becoming a part of the Tobacco Free Partnership of Clay County, contact Joey O'Hern, tobacco prevention specialist, at johern@quitdoc.com, or visit the website at www.tfp-clay.org.



CORRESPONDENT PHOTO BY DEBRA W. BUEHN

The Quit Doc

Pediatrician Barry Hummel explains the Quit Doc Research and Education Foundation's program aimed at helping Clay County residents kick the tobacco habit. The Foundation has been awarded community-based tobacco prevention grants through the Florida Department of Health in 11 of Florida's 67 counties, with Clay County being one of them. Hummel kicked off the 2012-2013 year for the Tobacco Free Partnership of Clay County.