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Life & Arts

Front Page > Life & Arts > Health

HEALTH

Young agents accept mission: Help reduce area's stroke rate

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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
Gary M. Jones II, left, and Sarielys Matos try to move a stage prop that represents a giant blood clot during rehearsal for "Agent S.A.M.— The Stroke Awareness Mission" being staged by the Theatre of Youth.

Some of the area's 9- and 10-year-olds are about to be transformed into agents of change.

Special agents, that is.

Armed with briefcases, their mission will be to show up at 3,200 city doorsteps to combat an ugly and dangerous fact of life on the Niagara Frontier:

Western New York has one of the worst stroke death rates in America - 23 percent higher than the rest of the nation and 79 percent higher than the rest of New York State.

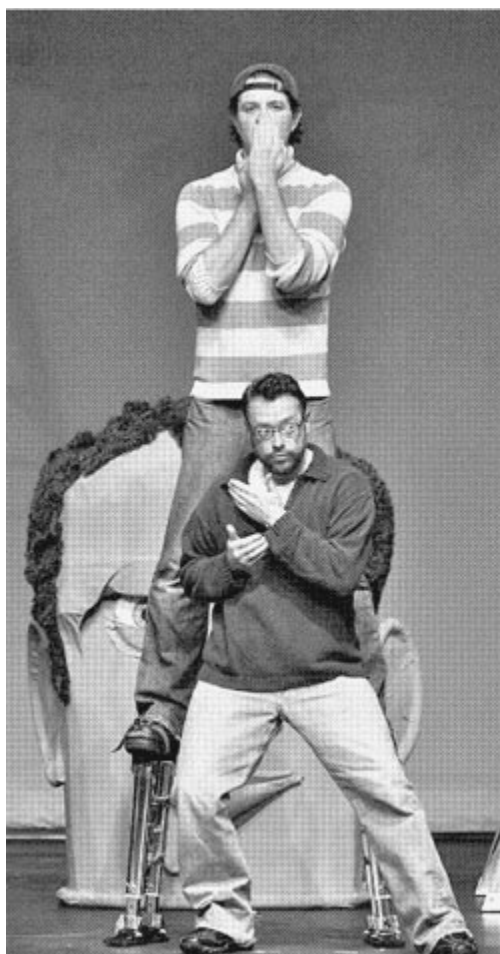
"The death rate for stroke in Western New York is staggering," acknowledges Dr. Frederick E. Munschauer III, chief of Buffalo's Jacobs Neurological Institute.

The statistics are so bad, in fact, that they caught the attention of British-based pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca, which in May awarded a grant to the institute's Research Center for Stroke & Heart Disease to try and do something about it.

The Jacobs institute and its artistic partner, Buffalo's Theatre of Youth, came up with a plan to use the city's children as messengers: Write a play that totally engages kids but does not frighten them, and make the children information ambassadors to households of people they know and care about. Then, follow up with phone calls.

If this strategy works, plans are for the program to go nationwide, according to Shannon Carrow, executive director of the Research Center for Stroke & Heart Disease.

The play, called "Agent S.A.M. - The Stroke Awareness Mission," was specially commissioned for and written by TOY and is scheduled to run five times this week,



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
Tim Newell and Kevin Keleher, top, star in "Agent S.A.M.: The Stroke Awareness Mission" presented by the Theatre of Youth at the Allendale Theater.

Wednesday through Friday. The audiences are Buffalo Public Schools students, on field trips to the theater.

The play takes viewers on a tour inside the body as a stroke occurs and teaches kids the warning signs. Gigantic "blood clots," a car on stage and a huge head all play supporting roles. Nickelodeon's David Sheldon helped with the project, as did Buffalo's WNED-TV.

At the play's conclusion, the actors come into the theater audience and hand out "tool kits" to each child. The children are challenged to speak to four adults in four different households about stroke warning signs.

The success of the whole project hinges on the children and the knowledge they will personally be challenged to take into 3,200 households by Nov. 27. Pay attention, people: You may be one of the adults approached by the students and there will be a follow-up telephone survey to see how well these kids do in their jobs.

And then there will be more telephone surveys - one month, three months and six months after the kids exit TOY's theater doors on Allen Street to see how well the message sticks and if any lives are saved.

Fourth- and fifth-grade youngsters might seem an unlikely choice to carry out the mission, says Carrow, but they were specifically chosen because "it's a very teachable age."

They are not too young to be frightened by the message, she said, and yet not so old that they think it's "not cool" to participate in a project like this.

And just what is the message?

"If a child sees that grandma suddenly can't lift her arm or has sudden trouble seeing, they'll tell her not to go to bed and see if she feels better tomorrow morning. They're going to call 911 and get her to the emergency room as soon as possible."

There is a three-hour window, Carrow says, that may spell the difference between a good potential recovery from stroke or irreversible damage and possibly death. Getting to the hospital is critical.

"The goal is to motivate the kids to want to take this information home and use it," said Meg Quinn, TOY's artistic director, who wrote the play and who describes it as "a biology lesson done as creative drama technique in a play format."

Specifically, the play trains the youngsters to recognize five warning signs of stroke:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding.
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.

- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

The play does not address how to change the known risk factors that pave the way for people to suffer a stroke - overweight/obesity, type II diabetes, hypertension, smoking and high cholesterol - all of which are extraordinarily high in Western New York.

Still, Carrow says, the hope is that the young special agents can help put a dent in the region's stroke mortality statistics and increase the chances that friends and loved ones will suffer less damage and have better recoveries.

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