

PREVENTING SUDDEN DEATHS

CMS athletes to get free heart tests

Gifts of time, gear allow more thorough physicals

By KAREN GARLOCH

kgarloch@charlotteobserver.com

For the first time, student-athletes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are being offered free physical exams that include screening for heart problems that could lead to sudden death.

Volunteer health care providers expect to test at least 2,000 high school athletes May 31. But Dr. Herb Stern, a pediatric cardiologist with Sanger Clinic, said no student who signs up will be turned away.

Stern, who has long pushed for cardiac screening of student-athletes, said it will prevent the deaths of young athletes who collapse without warning during a game or practice. Such instances are rare, but several have occurred in the Carolinas in recent years.

Standard physicals offered to students before they can participate in sports are "completely and totally ineffective," Stern said Tuesday at a news conference with CMS Superintendent

Peter Gorman.

The cause of sudden death among young athletes is often hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a rare and often inherited condition that causes thickening of the heart. The disease often shows no symptoms until it kills.

Stern said that abnormality is not usually detected through routine physicals for athletes. But it can be spotted with electrocardiograms, readings of the heart's electrical activity, and echocardiograms, tests that use sound waves to provide a live picture of the beating heart.

Screening with these tests costs about \$1,500 per person. Experts estimate that testing every student, amateur and professional athlete in the United States - about 10 million - would cost \$2 billion a year, including follow-ups on abnormal findings. That's part of the reason they aren't routinely offered.

But Stern said cost isn't a factor for the Charlotte program because dozens of doctors, nurses and technicians are volunteering their time, and equipment manufacturers are providing testing devices for free. Carolinas HealthCare Foundation and

Kohl's Department Stores have donated a total of \$40,000 to cover expenses. Specialists from OrthoCarolina and CMC's Sports Medicine Program will also participate in the screening day, expected to be held annually.

In the past two years, Stern and other volunteers offered cardiac tests to 188 private school athletes as a pilot project. Doctors diagnosed one case of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and about 30 other heart conditions and referred students for treatment.

"There is no question," Stern said, "that we're going to save kids by doing this."

Karen Garloch: 704-358-5078

About Heart of a Champion Day

■ May 31, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Carolinas College of Health Sciences, 1200 Blythe Blvd.

■ Parents of rising 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade students who want the screening must complete a health questionnaire and return it to the high school athletics director or trainer by May 5.

■ Get forms from CMS high school athletics directors, www.cms.k12.nc.us or www.levinechildrens.com hospital.org.

■ May 31, students will be bused to the screening site from their high schools.

