

Scott Redding:

Welcome to The Three P's of Cancer Podcast, where we'll discuss prevention, preparedness, and progress in cancer treatments and research, brought to you by the University of Michigan Rogel Cancer Center. I'm Scott Redding. We're here with Dr. Larry An, Co-Director of the University of Michigan Center for Health Communications Research, to talk about a new tool to help people and the prevention of cancer and they'll live healthier lives.

A little bit about Larry. Along with being the co-director of the Center for Health Communications Research, he's also the scientific director of the Cancer Survivorship Program. He and his center work on understanding how improving communication and the way in which people find and use information impacts people's health. This is important in terms of preventing cancer, making sure cancer patients get the right treatment, and helping to support cancer patients and families during the treatment and into survivorship.

He is particularly interested in how changes in the way in which we get information, like the internet and smartphones, can be used to improve health and healthcare. Welcome, Larry. Can you give us a little background on what exactly the Center for Health Communications Research is, and its role in cancer care?

Dr. Larry An:

Oh, thank you so much and thanks for having me on. I'm really excited to be here and have a chance to talk about the center and the work that we do with the cancer center. So the Center for Health Communications Research has been around for about 20 years. We were founded by Victor Strecher and the School of Public Health, and we really built around the notion of tailored and personalized health communication.

I think we all know in this modern day and age, there's way too much information out there for us to sort of find and use in a meaningful way. It can be really quite overwhelming at times. So what we try to do is learn something about the individual, what information do they need to know? What are their concerns? What are the resources? Where might they need additional resources? And then after we learn about the individual, we can put together, through this process that we call tailoring, a personalized message for them.

It just addresses their specific needs and concerns. Because it's personalized for them, it's more valuable. Because it's more valuable, people tend to pay more attention to it, and they can get the information that they need in less time. And because of that, it's really shown to be effective in improving people's choices in terms of their lifestyles or cancer screening, in improving decision making around cancer treatments, and improving support during cancer care. So that's broadly the work that we do.

Scott Redding:

So I know we're going to talk about one specific tool right now, but have there been other avenues that you've done some research around as it relates to helping cancer patients and other healthcare patients?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So I won't speak for myself, but I'll speak broadly for the center. As I mentioned, the center has been around for about 20 years. Just this past year, we completed our 200th program. So we've been doing this work for quite some time. Even though we do work with technology, we're very much coming from the notion that in order to use technology the right way, you really have to understand people and what people need. Right? The mistake is to design programs around the latest and coolest technology. The more we understand people, the better job we can do developing programs that are useful for them. Right?

Scott Redding: Well, you talked about understanding people. Is that kind of how those Tips 4 Health came about?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So the Tips 4 Health program is really designed as a way to help people lead healthier lifestyles. And the really exciting thing about this program is we're doing this work here at the University of Michigan through the Rogel Cancer Center, but we're also partnering with the National Cancer Institute. So the National Cancer Institute has spent a lot of effort and resources developing text messaging based programs to help people lead healthier lifestyle, whether that's stopping smoking, improving their diets, increasing their physical activity.

We've partnered with them to sort of develop a local Michigan version of those programs and then we're rolling them out to people in our communities, and who work at the University of Michigan, and get care at the cancer center.

Scott Redding: It sounds like this is a text based application, or is it a phone app, or how exactly does someone access it?

Dr. Larry An: How does this program work? Yeah. So the program itself is text based and there's some reasons for that, right? The reason it's text based is we wanted it to be broadly available to all people. Right? We know that increasingly, there's been a shift out in the world. You and I probably remember the day when you had landlines.

Scott Redding: Yep.

Dr. Larry An: So now people are carrying phones around in their pockets and they're able to do so many different things on those phones. And one of the things that people do very commonly is they message and they use text messaging. We wanted to be able to use that as a channel to support healthier lifestyles, and we're doing that in partnership with the National Cancer Institute.

Scott Redding: It's text based. So how exactly does Tips 4 Health work?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So people are able to sign up through the program a lot of different ways. We can get you our text number. People can text a number to sign up. Another way they can sign up, we have a Tips 4 Health website that people can go to,

input their information, including their cell phone number, and pick the program that they might want to be a part of. But after they've signed up, then the program goes forward interacting through text messaging.

Scott Redding: So you had mentioned that this is actually part of a larger initiative through the NCI National Cancer Institute.

Dr. Larry An: Right.

Scott Redding: Do I have to be in Ann Arbor or Michigan to utilize Tips 4 Health or could I be in Ohio or South Carolina somewhere to be able to access it?

Dr. Larry An: I think technically, people could access it from anywhere, but we're really trying to roll out Tips 4 Health and we developed with an eye towards engaging the community. And we can talk more about that. So a lot of the promotions, a lot of the engagement is we're finding partners in the community to work with in terms of promoting the program. So for example, we're working through ...

The cancer center has a community engagement program called Body And Soul where they engage with African American churches in the local community. And we're working with that program to introduce the Tips 4 Health program currently. And we have some really exciting, I think, plans going forward where we're going to be even more engaging, where we're going to actually ask members of the community to help us write and update these programs.

Scott Redding: Wow. That sounds really interesting and great to be able to engage the community and how something like this might move forward.

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. That's what we're finding, is that the important thing is that in this age of technology, that we maintain those human connections and relationships. Right? And that's one way of doing it.

Scott Redding: Can you describe a little bit more in detail about what it is, what the tool does, and the elements that make it up?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So what we've really tried to do is create a program that is helpful to people but not burdensome and is easy for people to use. So each of the programs, say the physical activity program or the nutrition program, they are six week long programs. What people do every week is they set a goal, right? And we know that, I know this too, trying to change your choices and lifestyle, that can be daunting and overwhelming at times. So we've really tried to make it simple and easy for people so they can set simple goals.

So for example, there's a weekly goal that you would set each week going through these programs, and they're what we like to think of sort of as simple and attainable. So for example, physical activity might be trying to increase your activity by even five or 10 more minutes per day, taking an extra walk, trying to

sit less often, right? Trying to maybe spend a little bit less time in front of the TV and computer screen.

So people are able to set those kinds of goals and then they get encouraging messages and support over the course of the week in terms of their progress toward those goals. We check in at the end of the week, how did that goal go for them? And then they set a new goal for the upcoming week, and that repeats itself over the six week period around nutrition where it's also trying to break it down into simple goals, whether that's trying to find healthier snacks, avoiding sugar sweetened beverages, which can be a real killer in terms of your weight and your waistline and your health, unfortunately.

Those sorts of things where people can set simple concrete goals and make progress toward those goals. So we've tried to develop in that way. What we're finding is that people really love the program. We're getting great response and continued use of the program and a lot of people are actually telling us that it's making a difference in terms of their life.

Scott Redding: Great. And then do they get ... You said they kind of get an update at the end of the week of where they're at, but do they get any kind of feedback around those goals and where they are from our end outside of just a text message back from an encouragement standpoint?

Dr. Larry An: Right now, it's mainly encouragement. But these are the types of things we want to work on with the communities, building these more encouraging messages. Right? And we think it'll be really exciting if those messages are written by real people who've used the programs rather than people like you or me that work in offices somewhere.

Scott Redding: And then, so you highlighted too exercise and nutrition. Are there any additional ones currently or in the future?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So we have a stop smoking program as well. Not that many people have signed up for that one so far. And then coming over the next couple months is going to be a program to help people with cancer screening and prevention. This particular program is going to be to help people sort of follow through on decisions to have screening for colorectal cancer. We know that's a really important cancer. We know that screening is a very effective strategy in terms of reducing the risk of cancer. And many people think they should do it, but then sometimes it's hard to follow through on what we think we should do. So the program is built to help people follow through on those decisions.

Scott Redding: Yeah. Unfortunately, it probably won't take away the prep though, will it?

Dr. Larry An: It does not take away the prep, though it does help people consider what the different options are for the prep and hopefully pick one that's right for them because there are some different options.

Scott Redding: So outside of the potential future module, and obviously nutrition, exercise, stopping smoking are all preventative measures for cancer, but they also seem like just kind of general, any health related good things to be doing.

Dr. Larry An: Sure.

Scott Redding: Is there research behind why we focused on these areas, or why this was a focus? Or with cancer, could it also be used towards heart prevention or other kinds of disease prevention?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah. So this is where we like to think or I like to think of this as a win win, right? Because our work is with the cancer center and we're partnering with the National Cancer Institute in this work, but you're exactly right. Those things that are good in terms of your health that reduce your risk of cancer also have benefits in terms of reducing the risk of heart disease.

The reason we picked these behaviors, particularly in stopping smoking, healthy eating, increasing physical activity, is we know that about half of all cancers are actually caused by people's choices in terms of their lifestyle. Right? And so we want to be able to make a difference there in terms of helping reduce the development of cancer. We also know that after people have had cancer, that these healthy lifestyle decisions are really important in terms of recovering and being healthy after cancer and reducing the risk of getting another cancer as well. Right? So that's why we picked them.

In terms of the strategies and what's built into these programs, we know both from these programs and from research and experience in general, there's a couple of things that people need to be successful in changing their behaviors, right? First they have to have the capacity, they have to be able to do it. They have to be motivated, they have to want to do it, and then they have to have the opportunity. They have to have the right things around them, whether it's the physical environment, or the social environment that really supports that behavior change.

Unfortunately, we can't change the physical and social environment, but hopefully we can help people be a little bit more able, a little bit more motivated to be successful in their changes.

Scott Redding: It sounds like this is good for anyone to be able to access and use for various other reasons you just said, but are there maybe specific populations, or specific age range, or specific people that might benefit more from accessing this tool?

Dr. Larry An: Right. So I think you are right on both counts, right? So you're right in the sense that this is probably something that's good for everybody and we really wanted to build it to be accessible to anybody. So for people that out there near a computer or on their phone, they can Google Tips 4 Health. The four is the number four. Tips 4 Health, and they should be able to find the program and

look at the different options and choose one if they want to give it a try. So I'd really encourage people to do that.

In terms of other special populations, we know that, unfortunately, the world is not fair. Some people have more or less advantage in the world and unfortunately, people who oftentimes have less advantage have more struggles or more problems with some of these health issues in terms of it's harder to quit smoking, it's harder to eat healthy, it's harder to find the time or opportunity for physical activity if you live in a more challenging environment or situation.

So I think we really took this text messaging based approach because we wanted to think of a way that we could offer services to people without needing them to have to sort of get up and go into a club or get up and join with a membership somewhere. And so we really wanted to make it accessible for people in that way.

Scott Redding: So this has been very enlightening and knowing that some of the direction that is being used to help patients, and hopefully not future patients, but you know, maybe for that prevention aspect. But if we were to do a wrap up of key points to remember, what would those be as it relates to Tips 4 Health and prevention in general around certain health issues?

Dr. Larry An: So the big thing to remember, this is something that you can use on your phone, that you can sign up by going to tips4health.org. That'll help you make small changes throughout your day that can help you stop smoking, have you eat more healthy, have you be more physically active, right? And it's for everybody to use. We've had over almost a thousand people using it so far and people are reporting great success.

About 70 percent of people are reporting they're being more physically active or improving their diets after they use the program. So really encourage people to give it a try, give us their feedback on use of the program, and we look forward to reaching out and finding more community partners to work with in terms of getting the word out.

Scott Redding: And I know you mentioned briefly about, if I could ask one more quick question now that we wrap up.

Dr. Larry An: Sure.

Scott Redding: About adding, in the coming months, a future colorectal screening portion. Are there other areas too that maybe down the road that you might be looking at, or when you start to work with the community, you might be asking them what they might be looking to find useful?

Dr. Larry An: Yeah, I think it's going to be that approach. We do know that the National Cancer Institute is developing a text messaging program for weight loss, so I think that might be popular in the community as well. It'll be a back and forth conversation, as all good communication should be.

Scott Redding: Okay. Well, thanks for the time. We can just remind people that go to tips4health.org for more information, to sign up, and keep an eye on it for future modules.

Dr. Larry An: All right, thank you so much. Thanks for your time.

Scott Redding: Thank you.

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