

PRIMARY SCHOOL INITIATIVE/PROGRAMME
"PREPARING THEM FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE"

SAINT LUCIA CANCER SOCIETY (SLCS)



by Dr. Tamara Remy, President, SLCS

Saint Lucia Cancer Society has embarked on a Primary School Initiative aimed at taking self-empowerment and education to our youth – our most impressionable, and our future: the primary schoolers. We target students of Grades 4- 6 and depend solely on the voluntary participation of interested schools. The participating principals receive and review our proposal, and then schedule convenient times for our visit. There is an initial school visit. We aim for no more than 30 children per session. Depending on our staff, we can host more than one group (separately) at the same time. (We plan to re-visit each school within the school year and see how the kids are following through with what they have been taught.) We speak with the principals about potable water availability at the schools; and we use the opportunity to interact with the cooks at the schools where school-feeding programmes to get a sense of the menus.

For now, this is a project of SLCS, and does not include the involvement or participation of the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Education.

Our Education Committee's tagline is "Healthy today....healthy tomorrow" and this embodies our belief that our most effective method of reducing the incidence of cancer in our country is by prevention and reducing risks. We advocate for healthy lifestyles, and push for individual change and modification of risks. Self-empowerment starting with the youth who are our future is our chosen pathway. We are aware of the epidemic of Childhood Obesity in the Caribbean and cannot ignore the contribution of obesity to non-communicable diseases, of which cancer is one.

The programme started off in the month of September – Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. We visited our first school – Laborie Boys Primary School- where we had an upbeat and energy-filled afternoon. Our primary focus is bringing the attention to the Sweet Sugary Drinks being consumed by our students, and then attempting to eliminate them from their diets and encourage water consumption instead. We had attempted introducing the salt content in food but this proved difficult, compared with teaspoons of sugar.

The layout of the programme is as follows:

- Exercise session for 30 mins
- Teaching session: Food groups, effects of excess sugar intake, NCDs, calculating the number of teaspoons of sugar in common SSBs (4 times tables), and some snacks; reading labels.
- Demonstration: Display common SSBs, reading labels and calculating teaspoons of sugar
- Serving of healthy snacks: as alternatives to other sweet snacks.
- Each student is left with a bookmark created by SLCS with our original healthy tips as a reminder.

As we have progressed, we have seen the need to have a formal evaluation of our work. We are currently working on a short survey to be done by the children - before and after - to evaluate our effectiveness, and to use this to adjust what we do. We would also use this survey to collect information on the number of SSBs consumed by the students.

We have also requested as part of our programme an audience with the PTA – when available – to reinforce what we have taught, as well as to encourage buy-in by parents and teachers. We plan to leave posters with the vegetable and fruit serving recommendations (from HCC) at our schools. Our proposal is left with the principals of each school for dissemination to the staff.

Moving forward, we have reached out to Corporate St. Lucia for sponsorship. Our main expenses include preparation of healthy snacks for each set of students, and stationery and printing. We hope also to submit our programme to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health to foster a partnership that can result in the incorporation of the programme into the curriculum of the Primary Schools.

The ultimate short-term goals are:

- Primary schoolers being self-empowered to choose the healthy alternative
- Primary schoolers becoming advocates for their well-being and health, and demanding access to healthy options.
- Parental involvement and participation in these healthy choices.
- School involvement in the provision of potable drinking water and ultimately banning SSBs at schools. (We do not insist on bottled water.)
- Awareness of healthy food options for sale/distribution at schools where school-feeding programmes exist (fat, salt and sugar content).

So far we have visited 8 schools, and attended 1 PTA meeting. We have a volunteer base of 4-5 persons. The funding for this has been solely by SLCS.

