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NORWOOD POST > NEWS

Scales, lies and blood glucose levels

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A first person look at Tri-County Health Network's free heart health screening

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It took about two months for Tri-County Health Network's (TCHN) local community health worker Deon Tempfer to convince me to participate in the organization's free cardiovascular health screening.

The program, which was launched in late-September, is meant to bolster the health of rural communities by helping individuals identify their risk for cardiovascular disease, connect them with local resources to help them reduce that risk and then follow up on attainable health goals.

While two months might seem like an inordinate amount of time, it should actually be seen as a testament to Tempfer's skills of persuasion considering my complete disdain for intentionally making myself bleed and my long-standing denial of needing to know anything about my health, cardiovascular or otherwise. But after being pleasantly chided by Tempfer on several different occasions, I finally relented.

Much of TCHN's cardiovascular screening initiative is built on individuals like Tempfer. They are not only tasked with persuading individuals to participate, but are also required to become a kind of guide towards better health outcomes through post screening follow-up and encouragement.

At the time of my screening, Tempfer had already seen over 50 community members. And it looked like she had no intention of slowing down.

Last week Tempfer arrived at the Post offices (otherwise known as my kitchen) and in a matter of minutes had set up a complete screening clinic that included machines to check my blood pressure, my weight, my blood glucose levels and my lipids. She had a laptop, a printer and a gentle demeanor that immediately put me at ease.

The most uncomfortable parts of the screening are completed first. Truthfully, the quick, virtually painless prick of a lancet on one finger, required for the lipid and blood sugar tests, was far less unpleasant than looking at the numbers on the scale, required to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI), the popular indicator of where one sits on the svelte/ obese scale.

And here is perhaps the one flaw in the screening process: It's only as good as the information you give. BMI is calculated based on weight and height. While I was happily a pound under two bills on the scale, I was being a bit more ambitious about my stature.

"How tall are you? About 5'11"?" Tempfer suggested.

"That sounds about right," I agreed. It wasn't a lie per se. It was more a fib. I am 5'11" in my boots. However, BMI has nothing to do with boots. Also I wasn't wearing them.

Once the calculation was completed, I was merely on the cusp of 'obesity' but still in the 'overweight' category, something I'd suspected anyway.

Tempfer's machines give far less leeway in terms of being able to fib about your health. Blood pressure is not subjective (mine was alright for a newspaper editor) and neither are blood sugar and

lipid counts. As the machine gave numbers, Tempfer was encouraging. She tapped the information into her computer.

Tempfer also led me through a series of questions about my smoking habits (an occasional cigar), my eating habits (not that great) and family history, that when added to the hard numbers create what's called the "Farmingham risk score." This score provides an estimate of an individuals cardiovascular risk for the next ten years.

Once the process was complete, Tempfer's printer sprung to life and printed out a tidy sheet that laid out where I was on the scale. Essentially, it explained that only three of 100 people in my risk category will have a heart attack or suffer from cardiovascular disease in the next ten years. It was a huge relief. I have not visited a doctor for years due to lack of health insurance and I had long feared I was on a fast-track to a heart attack.

Even after I later contacted Tempfer to come clean about my true height, I was still, luckily, just this side of obese and my risk percentile had not changed.

In terms of the work that Tempfer has done, I am in the majority in Norwood. Of the 58 people that Tempfer has seen only 31% are at or above elevated risk on the Farmingham risk scale. That's very good news for this community.

However, Tempfer has much work to do. With 39 local women screened and only 19 men, the percentage of "at risk" individuals could easily swing.

Tempfer is definitely looking to screen more men, hopefully by connecting with, and screening at, work places that have a higher ratio of men.

There are actually huge benefits to being screened by TCHN, Tempfer points out. Not only do you get perks like a pedometer and coupons to the Paradox Produce Company, but you can also receive referrals to a network of health care providers that can work with you regardless your level of insurance or income.

The suggestions for me, based on my screening, were to walk more and to eat a little better. All of which I plan to do, if only to keep Tempfer smiling when she follows up in a couple of weeks.

Contact Tempfer at 209-8811 to get in touch with Tempfer and receive the free screening at your home or workplace.

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