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By Katie Morford

Every day, every few seconds, every person, no matter where in the world they live or their socio-economic status, does something that saves their life. They breathe.

Our ability to take each breath of life-sustaining air is often taken for granted. But for many people who struggle with respiratory health issues, it can be a daily and even more frequent challenge. At Community Memorial Healthcare, Inc. (CMH) in Marysville, Kan., a team of health professionals is seeking to make the lives of those with respiratory health struggles just a little easier.

They developed the “Breathe Better” educational program as a public education tool to teach people of all ages about lung-related problems, ways to prevent them, and how they can improve their quality of life, while dealing with an existing condition. The program is a two-pronged effort to reach patients and their families in a hospital setting, and inform the community in a public setting, with special emphasis on children.

“The community has given the cardiopulmonary team an overwhelming positive response to our efforts,” said Cheryl Skinner, director of cardiopulmonary services at CMH. “We have had people comment that they

completely quit smoking because of the many educational tables, booths or speaking events we have provided throughout the community.”

CMH Public Relations and Marketing Director, Joni Nietfeld, said the cardiopulmonary team’s interactive approach to education helps draw in children and adults alike, as the booths are very hands-on.

“They really enjoy that interaction,” she said. “You have to get them to have fun and then you can bring in that educational component.”

“CMH respiratory therapy staff is leading the way in sharing their knowledge and expertise with our rural population.”

Joni Nietfeld, Community Memorial Healthcare, Inc.
Public Relations and Marketing Director

The initiative hasn’t been without its challenges, Skinner said, as some patients understand their disease but are non-compliant about treating it at home. However, the opportunity to help patients understand their disease, the disease process, and how to manage their symptoms, is a rewarding part of the project. Once they understand the education, she said, they have the tools to keep out of the hospital.

Skinner said the cardiopulmonary team has seen an increase in numbers of people participating in community health fairs and similar events, as

well as an increase in invitations for the team to come present at public events.

In recognition of the team’s efforts, the Kansas Health Foundation awarded a \$5,291 Recognition Grant to CMH to fund the “Breathe Better” program.

The grant allowed the cardiopulmonary team to purchase equipment and supplies better suited to educating their patients and community, enabling the team to reach a broad scope of patients through traditional

teaching methods, as well as interactive demonstrations, and help patients gain the knowledge needed to take an active role in their lung health.

“Each year we are amazed at the incredible projects being done by organizations across Kansas,” said Steve Coen, president and CEO of the Kansas Health Foundation. “This grant program allows us to support these innovative and impactful community initiatives and recognize the groups and individuals making them a reality.”

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In Marysville, Skinner is the individual helping make the “Breathe Better” program a reality. She is passionate about spreading awareness and her chosen profession, saying her mother was a nurse and she always knew she wanted to work in health care.

For Skinner, respiratory therapy and health is personal.

“I decided to join the field of respiratory therapy after my grandfather, who installed asbestos insulation in the 1950s and 60s, had been diagnosed and passed away with mesothelioma cancer in 1999,” she said.

Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer that develops from the lining of internal organs, most commonly found in the outer lining of the lungs and inner lining of the chest cavity. It’s usually caused by exposure to airborne asbestos dust or fibers.

Skinner received her Associate of Applied Science in Respiratory Care degree from Southeast Community College in Lincoln, Neb., in 2007 and her Bachelor of Arts in Healthcare Management from Ottawa University, Ottawa, Kan., in May 2012. She has worked at CMH since January 2008, and served as the director of cardiopulmonary services since

June 2012. Her staff includes Phillip Caswell, Jamie Tiemeyer, B.S., Roxanne Woodside, Jennifer Berg and Bob Garrett.

Skinner has provided the impetus for the “Breathe Better” program, and her enthusiasm and persistence has not gone unnoticed. In addition to Nietfeld, who said Skinner has been doing “fantastic” work since joining the CMH staff, Skinner has also received the commendation of her peers in the health care profession.

The Kansas Respiratory Care Society named Skinner the “2013 Respiratory Practitioner of the Year” in recognition of her work with CMH and the “Breathe Better” program. She was nominated for the award by colleague Charity Clark of Via Christi Hospital in Wichita, Kan. Candidates had to be licensed respiratory care providers and American Association for Respiratory Care members, and must be nominated by a peer.

“It was truly an honor to be named 2013 Kansas Respiratory Practitioner of the Year,” Skinner said. “I am blessed to work with a great group of professionals both at Community Memorial Healthcare and throughout the state of Kansas.

“My passion to go above and beyond has grown as a therapist from my colleagues and predecessors. With the support of my husband and family, I have been able to pursue my career goals and look forward to future accomplishments in my profession.”

Skinner is looking ahead to the future of the “Breathe Better” program as well, dreaming of what she’d like to see happen in 2014. Her goal is to take the next step by starting a pulmonary rehabilitation program at CMH to help further educate and provide their respiratory patients with a better quality of life. She said she’d also like to see the program grow by offering smoking cessation classes to the public and asthma education to parents during parent/teacher conferences.

“CMH respiratory therapy staff is leading the way in sharing their knowledge and expertise with our rural population,” Nietfeld said. “It is indeed a privilege to work with these individuals whose passion and enthusiasm is contagious.”

For more information about initiating a respiratory health program in your community, contact Cheryl Skinner at ceskinner@cmhcare.org.

