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Asheville actress Andie MacDowell supports new program that encourages patient-doctor dialogue

By Karen Chávez

When she turns 53 next year, actress and activist Andie MacDowell will be hitting a milestone that is not exactly a happy one.

It will be 30 years ago that, also at age 53, MacDowell's mother, Paula, died of a heart attack.

MacDowell, a resident of Biltmore Forest, was 23 at the time. To make things worse, MacDowell said, her mother's death was preventable.

"My mother's demise had a lot to do with her fear of going to a doctor," MacDowell said in a phone interview last week from New Orleans, where she is filming a movie with her 21-year-old daughter, Rainey.

MacDowell said her mother smoked and was not the picture of health, but she also never went to the doctor.

"If she had gone to a regular doctor every year, that doctor could have convinced her not to smoke," she said. "It was my mother being uncomfortable with doctors that probably took her life."

To prevent that tragedy from happening to other people, MacDowell has partnered with former U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona to highlight the importance of effective communication between patients and their doctors with a new program, "Time to Talk CARDIO (Creating A Real Dialogue In the Office)".

The educational program underwritten by Merck & Co., Inc., and developed in partnership with the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation, Canyon Ranch Institute and RIASWorks, was piloted by physician practices in North Carolina, Missouri and Mississippi. It is now being used in health care settings around the country to assist both patients and doctors in improving communication.

"Time to Talk CARDIO could prove to be a helpful tool in improving physician-patient dialogue," said Dr. Randell Wexler, assistant professor of clinical family medicine at The Ohio State University and Time to Talk CARDIO Advisory Board member. "It provides health care professionals a no cost, high quality way to improve their communication with patients and the care of cardiovascular disease."

One of the key components of Time to Talk CARDIO is a free, online, communication skill-building tool with hundreds of videos demonstrating methods to help make the most of the limited time in a medical visit.

Free resource can improve doctor-patient dialogue

The website timetotalkcardio.com offers videos showing “patients” of different genders and races with a variety of health issues and lifestyles, talking with their doctors. Visitors to the site can choose from the videos that address five key areas: Listen, educate, assess, partner and support.

“I have found these tools to be very useful myself,” MacDowell said. “I guess I inherited some of my mother’s hesitancy with doctors. I used to feel like their time was more important than mine. They have limited time schedules, they have patients back to back. If you’re already a nervous-type person, it can get upsetting, and you can miss something ... You end up having an experience that is unsatisfying.”

MacDowell said she took away two main pieces of advice from watching the videos.

“One is be prepared. If you have a tendency to get nervous, if you go in (to a doctor’s office) with notes, you can get answers you need,” she said. “And before you leave, go over everything the doctor has said to you.”

Dr. Shannon Dowler, medical director for Blue Ridge Community Health Center in Hendersonville, said although the practice was not part of the Time to Talk CARDIO pilot program, she is an advocate of the program and plans to have doctors in her practices go through the online training in the next few months.

She has ordered handouts for patients in English and Spanish that show them how to use the program and plans to have computers in the waiting room for patients to access the online tools when the new building opens next June.

“Both doctors and patients alike have walked out of an exam room feeling frustrated,” said Dowler, who is also Secretary/Treasurer for N.C. Academy of Family Physicians. “This program helps to open a dialogue and helps doctors to be more efficient. It really reinforces effective communication and at the same time empowers the patient.”

MacDowell said while the program is for everyone, she believes it will benefit women, who are often not good advocates for their own health, and especially when it comes to their own heart health.

According to the American Heart Association, heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women in the United States. In 2006, cardiovascular disease was the cause of death in 432,709 females.

MacDowell has three sisters and said their mother’s untimely death has helped them all to be more conscious of their overall health.

MacDowell, who has two daughters and a son, said she also believes the best way to encourage her children to be healthy throughout their lives is to model healthy habits such as eating healthy food, practicing yoga and hiking.

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She often hikes with her sister, Bev MacDowell, a teaching assistant at Carolina Day School in Asheville.

Bev MacDowell, who is 53, said she doesn’t dwell on the fact that she’s the same age now as her mother was when she died because she is proactive about her heart health and that of her husband

and children.

“A lot of women are busy, and especially mothers, they tend to not go and not recognize the signs of a heart attack,” Bev MacDowell said. “I go to the doctor regularly.”

Dowler said everyone can learn something by going to the program’s website.

“Whether the patient is apprehensive or overwhelmed, the tools in the program teach patients to be empowered to ask the questions they need answers to,” she said, “and to assure they totally understand the answers.”

Additional Facts

Cardiovascular disease

- More than one in three female adults has some form of cardiovascular disease.
 - Since 1984, the number of CVD deaths for females has exceeded those for males.
 - In 2006, CVD was the cause of death in 432,709 females. Females represent 52.1 percent of deaths from CVD.
 - In the United States in 2006, all cardiovascular diseases combined claimed the lives of 432,709 females while all forms of cancer combined to kill 269,819 females. Breast cancer claimed the lives of 40,821 females; lung cancer claimed 69,385.
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