

# Tight budget pulls plug on Peer Health

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After 18 continuous years on campus, the Peer Health educators program has been put on hiatus by University Health Services (UHS) due to budgetary constraints.

The program, which has been nationally recognized and a recipient of the Capital Health Innovation Award, formally consisted of approximately 18 trained student employees and a couple of assistants per semester. The employees managed displays and gave presentations across campus, on topics ranging from safe sex and contraception to recognizing the signs of alcohol poisoning.

Peer Health was discontinued for the 2006/07 year after the Students' Union rejected a proposal from UHS last February to place a question on the spring election ballot. The question would have asked students to vote on an increase in the Health Services fee by \$6, or 24 per cent, per term for the following year and further \$2 increases each of the following two years after that.

Vice-President (Student Life) Omer Yusuf said he's disappointed Peer Health won't be around this year, but explained the decision to not approve running the increase by students stemmed from the SU's reluctance to have student fees increase without

substantial financial information on how the fee would be used.

"They came to [the Graduate Students' Association] and Students' Council last year for a fee increase. GSA approved, but Students' Council didn't approve the increase," Yusuf said. "The main reason being that [the SU] didn't understand where that fee was going."

Because the SU doesn't have representation on the University's Board of Governors' Audit Committee, they're unable to track funds collected from students but administered by the University; however, a new committee has been put together to alleviate the problem and provide clarity for the SU on how a potential fee increase would be used.

"If we had a seat on the Audit Committee, a lot of these issues would be really clear for us," Yusuf said. He explained that the SU has put forward a health service advisory group made up of representatives from the SU's executive committee, SU councillors, GSA members, the Health Centre director and administrative director, as well as a member from the Dean of Students Office.

Health education coordinator Judy Hancock has spent the last 14 years supervising the Peer Health program and will continue to implement and supervise health promotion programs for students on campus. Although she still has help from one

remaining assistant, she's worried it won't be enough.

"We still have the TVs in the waiting rooms at the Health Centre—which I provide programming for—we still have posters on our windows, but we're not able to get out to the students the way the peer educators did," Hancock said.

According to Hancock, presentations put on by Peer Health educators help students fill important health related knowledge gaps they may not have been aware existed.

"Most people think they know everything they need to know about sex by the time they're 18," Hancock said.

Laura Wood, who worked as a Peer Health staff member last year, is disappointed the program had to be put on hold. She explained the group had little time last spring to get a presentation together prior to Student Council's vote.

"We were notified a week before the SU was planning to vote on the fee increase for the Health Centre, and so we only had a week to prepare what we were going to say to try and stop it," Wood explained.

And now that Peer Health isn't on campus, Wood further outlined the risk that students may no longer have a reliable source of information.

"There's also the possibility that misinformation can come on campus,"



JENNY FROGNER

**THOSE WERE THE DAYS** Ex-Peer Health educator, Laura Wood, says that important information will be missed by students with the program gone.

Wood explained. "Sometimes groups come that don't give out health information that's accurate or that has any medical backing."

UHS has indicated the program won't be reinstated until increased funding is received, but UHS hasn't declared it permanently cut.

"We do hope to have the program

back next fall—that's not for sure yet but we're optimistic," Hancock said. "I don't know how to reach 30 000 students without my peer educators. I'll use the TVs, I'll use the website, I'll speak to classes when I'm invited, but it's not the same to have a 50-year-old woman come in and talk as it is to have students."

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