

Rheumatology Education Day: IWK Health Centre

By Elizabeth Stringer, MD, FRCPC

The Pediatric Rheumatology Division at the IWK Health Centre hosted its first Rheumatology Education Day in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for families of children living with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). The IWK Health Centre, affiliated with Dalhousie University, serves as the pediatric tertiary care center for Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The rheumatology team presently follows over 375 children with JIA. In a survey completed by parents prior to the education day, we found that coping with chronic disease and pain were the top two topics that parents wished to focus on. Previous participation at The Hospital for Sick Children's Rheumatology Education Day in Toronto was very helpful in planning this event.

The event took place on a beautiful Saturday in early October. We were fortunate to have a great venue for children in which to host the day—a school with a playground, gymnasium and warm therapy pool. Over 70 parents and children from the three maritime provinces attended.

The day began with poster sessions for the parents ranging on information about the novel H1N1 virus, to the importance of screening eye exams for children with JIA, to the role of the hospital's Child Life Department in helping children cope with arthritis. This was followed by a very competitive game of "Nutrition Jeopardy" led by our two pediatric dietitians. Dr. Lynn Breau, a clinical psychologist and researcher in children's pain, along with our team's physical and occupational therapists led a panel discussion on coping with pain with an emphasis on physical activity and sports.

The highlight of the day for parents and team members alike was a panel discussion led by IWK graduates. The panel consisted of a young woman and her mother, and another young woman, both diagnosed with JIA as toddlers. They shared personal stories of their journey with arthritis—reflecting on their most difficult times and what helped them through those times, the barriers they had to overcome, and the multiple personal successes they had achieved in their lives. It was a moving testament as to how arthritis can affect a child, but not become a child's identity.



Rheumatology Education Day at the IWK Health Centre.

The children had a very busy day with tile-painting, yoga, relay races, a magic show and a swim to end the day. It was wonderful to see the children with JIA and their siblings getting to know each other by meeting other children with arthritis. The focus of the day was not their disease, but having fun together.

The feedback we received from parents was overwhelmingly positive. Parents enthusiastically endorsed recommending a day such as this to other parents of children with JIA. They commented on feeling less isolated and how feeling connected to other parents could help to reduce stress and make them feel less afraid. Our team's social worker led a discussion around tips for initiating parent-led support groups or networks in their communities. For future Education Days, we plan to incorporate sessions on arthritis for the children and their siblings in attendance.

The Education Day was made possible through many volunteer hours by our team, other IWK staff, Dalhousie medical students and members of the local Pathfinders group. We are thankful to The Arthritis Society of Nova Scotia and other community members for generously supporting this event. We know everyone involved took home something valuable and we look forward to planning for next year!

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