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Life Saver

Potential life-threatening condition found during free student-athlete physicals

By: Anna Wilson, The News Herald, Burke County, NC

MORGANTON - Close to 600 student-athletes turned out for free physicals last Saturday at Grace Hospital. For one athlete, the physical could have saved his life.

David Clark, MD, was one of several local physicians helping the athletes through the various health stations — height and weight; blood pressure and pulse; vision acuity; musculoskeletal and general medical.

"With one boy, I heard a loud heart murmur," said Dr. Clark, a pulmonologist (lung specialist) at Blue Ridge Pulmonary and Sleep Center. "I immediately sent him to Dr. Bracken."

After evaluating the student-athlete, Anthony Bracken, MD, a cardiologist with the Sanger Heart Institute at Blue Ridge HealthCare, ordered an echocardiogram. Because the physicals took place at the hospital, the young athlete had the test that day. Based on the results, Dr. Bracken diagnosed aortic stenosis and aortic regurgitation, meaning blood flow is restricted in the aorta — the main artery leaving the heart — because the aortic valve is not fully opening and closing. "He didn't complain of symptoms," Dr. Bracken said. "This is congenital — he's had it since birth."

In the right situation such as sports and over exertion, Dr. Bracken said the condition could have been fatal without treatment. He referred the student to Lisa Klein, MD, a Sanger Heart and Vascular Institute pediatric cardiologist, who will determine whether the student will be able to play sports after a complete echocardiogram and evaluation. "Having access to extra tests is one reason we wanted to have the physicals at the hospitals instead of the schools," said Myron Stephens, manager of Blue Ridge HealthCare's Sports Medicine Center, which sponsored the physicals. "If something turned up during the general exam, we had immediate access to specialists like a pulmonologist and cardiologist and access to tests like the echocardiogram if needed."

Altogether, about 10 students had an echocardiogram on Saturday. One more student was diagnosed with a heart murmur, but it was not as serious as the aortic stenosis. He was also referred to Dr. Klein for a complete evaluation.

"If we can save a student-athlete's life or make them aware of some health issue, then that makes these free physicals worthwhile," Stephens said.

In order to play sports this fall, student-athletes had to have a pre-participation physical. As a service to the community, Blue Ridge HealthCare has offered free physicals since

the inception of the Sports Medicine Center in 2007. Numerous healthcare providers help with the physicals including family physicians and specialized physicians such as pulmonologist, cardiologists and orthopedists. Additionally, Morganton Eye Physicians participated for the first time by offering free vision exams.

"We wanted to offer these young athletes a better level of care than we have previously been able to offer at the schools," said Laura Lambeth, BRHC Senior Vice President, Physician Services and Initiatives. "I'm so glad we were able to open up the hospitals and offer the free physicals on our campuses. This is an excellent opportunity for our local providers and BRHC to show that we care about our community."

Sports Physicals on June 5

The second round of free sports physicals will take place at Valdese Hospital on Saturday, June 5, starting at 8 a.m. where more than 400 students are expected to take part.

8 a.m. — Draughn High School

9 a.m. — Heritage Middle School

10 a.m. — East Burke High School

10:30 a.m. — East Burke Middle School

11 a.m. — Scheduled walk-ins (contact your school athletic trainer)

Athletes are asked to use the hospital's main entrance and follow the signs. Please wear comfortable clothing such as T-shirts and shorts. For additional information or questions please contact the Sports Medicine Center at 580-6826.

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