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Testing the hearts of young athletes

Screening program strives to prevent tragedy

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In the wake of several recent incidents in which seemingly healthy children suddenly died during sporting events, 150 young athletes were screened yesterday for heart trouble as part of a new effort to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

Many of the 6- to 18-year-old athletes at the health center in Livingston clearly felt that undergoing heart tests was not the best way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Their parents, however, felt differently.

"Why are we doing this? I'm OK. This is stupid," one girl complained.

"Never mind. You're going to do it," her father replied.

The screenings, part of a program called Playing with Heart, are run by the Saint Barnabas Health Care System. They are aimed at identifying potentially life-threatening heart problems before they occur.

"Frequently, it happens during exercise, although it's not exclusive to exercise," said Joel Hardin, director of cardiology at Children's Hospital of New Jersey in Newark, which is part of the Saint Barnabas system.

Last year, three young New Jersey athletes died of cardiac arrest, including James Bliss, a 16-year-old Caldwell High School junior and football player, who died in October after collapsing during a routine practice.

John Babbitt, 16, of Chatham, a junior and two-sport athlete at the Pingry School in Martinsville, died last March while playing basketball for a church league, and 11-year-old Janet Zelinski, a cheerleader from Warren Township, collapsed in August while jogging a lap during practice.

Several of the students who took part in yesterday's screenings were from the affected communities. John Granata, a youth soccer and lacrosse coach from West Caldwell, said Bliss' death brought the issue to the forefront in that community. When he learned of the program from Hardin, whom he knows, he immediately signed up his two daughters.

"In Caldwell, it kind of reperussed through everything," said Granata, whose daughters, Noel, 13, and Sara, 10, play both soccer and lacrosse. "It's kind of on everybody's mind."

Noel and Sara both turned out to be fine after a 20-minute examination by the doctors.

"It was definitely time well-spent," Granata said.

Hardin and the other health professionals who volunteered their time yesterday were especially on the lookout for two heart abnormalities: hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, also known as an enlarged heart, a condition resulting from an abnormal thickening of the heart muscle; and Long Q-T syndrome, which is a rare disorder affecting the heart's electrical rhythm.

Both conditions are treatable, Hardin said.

Every student yesterday received an electrocardiogram -- a test that records the heart's electrical activity. Each also had to fill out a questionnaire that asked -- among other things -- whether the student had ever fainted or experienced chest pain when exercising, or whether any family members suffered "sudden, unexpected death before age 50."

Hardin anticipates that about 10 percent of the students tested will have results that require follow-up, although he said the likelihood of finding a life-threatening heart problem is quite low, given the relatively small number of kids tested.

"If we happen to save one life, it's worth the time and effort," said John Gallucci Jr., director of the athletic training center at Saint Barnabas and the medical consultant for Major League Soccer.

This type of screening has been standard in Italy for more than two decades, resulting in an almost 80 percent reduction in sudden deaths of student athletes, Hardin said.

New recommendations published recently in the journal *Heart Rhythm* call for greater recognition and more prompt treatment of sudden cardiac arrest in young athletes. Having access to an automatic external defibrillator, a device that jump-starts the heart, is critical in the early minutes after an athlete collapses, according to the guidelines.

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA), the group that governs high school athletics in New Jersey, is working with the state Department of Education to have the pre-participation questionnaires student athletes fill out ask more specific questions about cardiovascular health and history.

Bob Baly, assistant director of the NJSIAA, said he knows of several other hospitals that are planning to hold screenings similar to the one held at Saint Barnabas yesterday.

"I think it's an outstanding first step," he said of yesterday's event. "Anything that makes athletes safer we applaud. We would like to see this become a statewide event."

Staff writer Brendan Berls contributed to this report.