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Mixing fun and learning at Barton Center for Diabetes Education

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OXFORD — Like other kids at summer camp, Hannah Murray has been enjoying herself riding horses, swimming and playing Quidditch with friends.

She doesn't even mind drawing blood from her finger to measure her blood sugar like other campers at the [Barton Center for Diabetes Education](#), Inc. in North Oxford.

"All the other kids here are diabetic so I don't feel alone," said the 10-year-old fifth grader from Sudbury, who wears an insulin pump on her leg. "I was 4 when I was diagnosed. Then I felt kind of nervous. Now, I feel like I can do anything."

At the sprawling 200-acre site, Executive Director Kevin Wilcoxon said the Barton Center "empowers" children like Hannah "because we speak their language."

He should know. He was diagnosed with Type One, or juvenile diabetes, in 1972 when he was 7-years-old. He spent most of his next 20 summers at the Barton Center first as a camper, then a counselor and, later, as seasonal camp director. He was appointed executive director last fall.

Located on and around the birthplace of Red Cross founder Clara Barton, the camp began in 1932 as "an island of safety" for children with diabetes.

A pioneer in using insulin to treat diabetic children, Dr. Elliot Joslin established the Clara Barton Camp on property owned by the Women's National Missionary Association of the Universalist Church who also provided financial assistance.

The Barton Center today has expanded to separate girls and boys camps that hold 93 and 75 visitors from 6 to 16 years old, respectively. They typically stay from one to three weeks. The center operates day camps for children 6 to 12 years old in Worcester, Boston and Northampton and three out of state.

Wilcoxon explained the camp hosts children with Type One diabetes by incorporating "teachable moments" about nutrition, exercise and insulin management "into all the other activities you'd see at any other camp." He estimated "between 70 to 80 percent of our counselors began as campers" returning to share their experiences with younger children.

About 70 percent of the campers wear insulin pumps on their torsos, arms or legs. Generally smaller than a pack of cards, the pumps deliver insulin beneath the skin when the wearer's blood sugar is high like after certain meals.

The other campers inject insulin several times a day.

"You'll see kids of all ages and sizes here," said Wilcoxon. "We're trying to give them the same camping experiences as kids everywhere while helping them live healthy, happy lives with diabetes."

On a bright Wednesday afternoon, the boys and girls camps are bustling with activity.

A counselor leads a conga line of young girls in an energetic step dance in an auditorium. At the boys camp two miles away in Charlton, youngsters line up for a swim before dinner.

Staying at camp for the first time, Weston Abusamra recalled "not really understanding what diabetes meant" when he was diagnosed at age 4 after drinking unusual amounts of water.

The 12-year-old from Northborough now plays first base in Babe Ruth League and said, "I can do everything I want but sometimes it slows me down."

"It's really nice to be here and make lots of new friends," said Abusamra. "It's helped me learn more about diabetes. That made me feel more comfortable."

A year after learning she's diabetic, 8-year-old Olivia Proffitt, of Westborough, has been attending the day camp for the first time and wants to return next year.

She's preparing to switch from injections to an insulin pump and said, "I'm learning how life could be easier that way. It makes me less nervous."

Clara Barton Camp Director Mary Ledbetter wears a tattoo on her inner forearm that states "Diabetic."

"It OK to be proud to be diabetic," said Ledbetter who was spent 16 years at the Barton Center as a camper, counselor and now director.

Even at a time when diabetes has lost much of its social stigma, she said the disease "still has an emotional pull."

Overseeing 50 counselors, 10 nurses and a doctor, Ledbetter and her staff incorporate "diabetes education into real life activities" rather than lecture-like classes.

"If a camper sees their blood sugar is low and they lack energy, we might ask them what they ate and help them discover whether they could have made better choices," she said. "The camp's goal is to give kids normalcy so they have an opportunity to learn how to function as diabetics and how to do it productively."

At the boys Camp Joslin, Director Mark Bissell and his staff use a program called Healthy Stars to mix fun with the reinforcement of positive habits that campers will retain to live healthy lives.

While the boys play sports, swim and have a weekly dance with the girls camp, he said staff seek "teachable moments" to impart lessons about diet, insulin management, exercise, sleep and stress.

A longtime former camper, Bissell is married to a diabetic and their 10-year-old daughter, Ellie, has juvenile diabetes.

"Diabetes has its own different dynamic. It's a personal disease," he said. "The real challenge in adolescence is keeping things under control while enjoying life like all your peers."

An hour before dinner, Benedict Hemsley and Tyler Terrien relax on their cabin porch, shooting the breeze.

A ninth grader from Westborough, Hemsley joked some people mistake his insulin pump for a Band Aid.

Tall, athletic and a "mostly all-A student," he plays Lacrosse and has learned to check his blood sugar before games to keep up his energy.

"I don't think diabetes complicates things," said Hemsley. "It's just one more thing you have to think about and take care of."

A sixth grader from Medford, Terrien said his diabetes doesn't keep him "from playing rough" as a lineman in Pop Warner football.

On his first two-week stay at camp, he said, "I'm kind of amazed how many people have it."

Terrien wears a T-shirt with the logo "It's not my iPod," a humorous rebuke to people who mistake insulin pumps for electronic devices.

"Sometimes it bugs me a little bit when my blood sugar is low and I feel like I have an empty stomach," said Terrien. "One thing I'm learning (at camp) is just because you're diabetic doesn't mean you have to be held back. You can do anything you want to."

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