



The health sciences are for you too, minority students told

Toronto medical students are offering tutoring and a unique mentorship program to encourage teens of Black African and aboriginal ancestry to consider a career in health sciences.

The University of Toronto's Summer Mentorship Program is the only one specifically aimed at these students, who are traditionally under-represented in the health sciences. During the 6-week program, students in grades 9 to 12 gain both academic skills and clinical and research experience. The 12 medical students who act as mentors provide academic counselling, tutoring and computer training. The teenagers also shadow health care professionals such as doctors, dentists and surgeons, and receive lectures from world-class experts.

At the end of the term students have to produce a research paper, and earn a credit in biology, physics or chemistry. The program can continue into a second or even third summer, with links to a researcher or another mentor. One student received a National Institute of Health studentship to help with a minorities access research study at Temple University. "It's a very enriched program," says Dr. Miriam Rossi, the associate dean of student affairs (admissions/awards).

Organizers say the pro-



Rania Gamiel (front left, sitting) with her mentors from the U of T's Department of Physiology

gram gives teens a chance to experience university life and learn about health care professions, consider attending university themselves, learn how to access scholarships and financial aid, and more. It was initiated and is run by the Student Affairs Office in the Faculty of Medicine, in cooperation with the Association for the Advancement of Blacks in Health Sciences and various Toronto-area boards of education. When it began in 1994, 7 students were enrolled; this year 40 have signed on. Engineering, social work and law students have started similar programs, and Dalhousie University is adopting Toronto's program.

The program has proved effective — partici-

pants' marks have improved by an average of 10%. "Once they see that university is a possibility they redouble their efforts in high school," says Rossi.

The mentorship program has also produced a second opportunity for teens: the Saturday Program. "The participating medical students were worried about the other kids who weren't doing well for socioeconomic or family reasons," says Rossi. "They were worried that good minds were being lost, that kids were dropping out because of poor school performance."

The result is the Saturday Program, which is aimed at students whose grades are below 70% in English, math or science.

Since the 10-week program began 2 years ago, it has grown from about 40 Grade 9 and 10 students to 75 students. It has also expanded to include students from all racial backgrounds. On Saturday mornings, about 100 specially trained university students — mostly medical undergraduates — provide individual tutoring and act as mentors by providing guidance on study habits, future education and career opportunities. After lunch, which is provided by the student medical society, sessions may involve a tour of university facilities, instruction on doing research, or a speech from specially chosen speakers. One recent speaker was a Toronto Raptors basketball player who spoke about the importance of education.

In a 1997 survey 41 of the 46 respondents indicated that the program is helpful, but they are not the only beneficiaries. "This is important for future doctors, who will have to deal with a wide range of patients and families," says Rossi.

At the May graduation ceremony, program coordinator Diana Alli asked the audience if their marks had improved; both high school and university students raised their hands. "They feel motivated working with these children," says Alli. "It helps everyone." — *Barbara Sibbald*