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'Kids don't know about drugs. They know where to buy it, what it looks like and what kind of high they can get from it. But they don't know about the medical horrors that are just coming out.'

Dr. Donald Macdonald

300 attend Dunedin drug awareness forum

By CRAIG ROBERTON
Clearwater Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — Her intensely worried, middle-aged face is becoming a familiar one. She wore it to a drug awareness forum April 14 at Clearwater High School. It showed up again at a follow-up meeting of concerned parents there on May 14.

On Wednesday night at Dunedin High School, she was there again, sitting alone, no doubt thinking of her three children. They were all victimized by today's drug culture. So far, she says, only two have been retrieved.

Three hundred other parents and children — many of the children of elementary school age — were also present. They had gathered for Dunedin High's first drug awareness forum, sponsored by the school and a new group called Dunedin Informed Parents Inc.

PANEL MEMBER Jim Hartz, executive director of Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation program in St. Petersburg,

praised the evident increase in parent concern.

"Parents are finally starting to learn that if they say, 'we've had enough,' they can be effective," Hartz said. "But they must know what's going on."

Hartz said that children do not "grow out of" drug use; unless treated, the problem only gets worse and often ends in death.

Blasting what he called "the hideous, heinous drug culture," Hartz admonished the parents to "get involved, see what you can do to help. You can make a difference."

Hartz was one of 10 panel members at the forum, organized by civic activist Monica Corso, who founded Dunedin Informed Parents Inc.

OTHER PANEL MEMBERS included Dr. Donald Macdonald, a Clearwater pediatrician who moderated the discussion; Shamus Allman, representing Operation PAR (Parental Awareness & Responsibility); School Board member Jerry Castellanos; County Commissioner

Joe Wornicki and two teen-age former drug users identified as Terry and Allan.

Macdonald, the father of a former drug user, warned parents that the medical dangers of marijuana and other drugs are only now becoming apparent. "Marijuana may be considerably more dangerous than alcohol," he said. Smoking four to five "joints" of marijuana a week is equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

Macdonald predicted that "a new heroin epidemic is on the way" because new, stronger varieties of heroin capable of being smoked are penetrating the market.

"Kids don't know about drugs," Macdonald said. "They know where to buy it, what it looks like and what kind of high they can get from it. But they don't know about the medical horrors that are just coming out."

Terry, 16, a Largo resident, said she started taking drugs when she was 13. "I got high sometimes three times a day," she said. "Everybody was doing it. I guess

I wanted people to like me."

But the price of being "liked" was great, Terry said. She said her family "was going down the drain."

BOTH TERRY and Allan kicked their drug use at Straight Inc.

Allman said Operation PAR tries to develop life management skills in drug users and to improve their self-image.

But unless we can change the environment that breeds drug use, Allman said, "We are really only touching the tip of the iceberg."

Allman admonished parents to "listen to your child" and "allow him to have feelings." Encourage them gradually to accept responsibility, he said, and, when disciplining children, "separate the deed from the doer."

Mrs. Corso hopes to mold Dunedin Informed Parents Inc. into a permanent, effective means "to inform and educate parents, adolescents and children about the dangers of marijuana and other mind-altering drugs." For more information, call Mrs. Corso at 734-8551.