

**Commentary on the Policy Forum: The Teenage Experience---What's healthy about it?**  
**Minnesota Public Health Association (MPHA)**  
**December 2012**

The Minnesota Public Health Association (MPHA)-sponsored policy forum series, *The Teenage Experience*, gives the public health community an opportunity to engage in a fresh take on the policy, systems and service issues surrounding our youth, families, and communities. On November 9, the first exciting conversation of this four-part series, focused on “*what is healthy about it?*” Three experts representing organizations working directly with teenagers shared key information, stories and resources (read forum notes and register for upcoming forum in January 2013 via MPHA website: [www.mpha.net](http://www.mpha.net) ). I've been invited to offer perspectives about MPHA's long history in advocating for policy and system changes to promote and support healthy children and teenagers as well as additional thoughts! So, here goes my attempt to present a context for engaging further in our conversations and actions over these next six months in particular.....

**It's important to ask big questions, reflecting a long view.** During the late 1960s, a time when society was undergoing changes in civil and human rights, MPHA undertook instrumental leadership roles in the Minnesota community. We initiated efforts to document basic unmet health needs (medical, dental, mental health care) of minors that focused on fear, stigma, and embarrassment as well as apprehension of parental or guardian reactions. Health providers often declined to see or treat minors without parental consent, fearing potential liability, even though Minnesota law was silent about their ability to serve minors without prior parental consent. MPHA forged partnerships with professional associations, agencies serving teen populations, and community groups to build a coalition for making an effective case to the Minnesota Legislature over two legislative sessions. We led the drafting of enabling legislation that empowered minors to seek needed help and services while concurrently enabling professionals to provide services on a confidential basis, without fear of legal consequences. Health professionals and the public were educated and mobilized along the way. In 1971, the Minnesota Legislature adopted, with the Governor signing, one of Minnesota's most important public health policies, the *Minor's Consent to Health Services Act* (subsequently amended in 1981). MPHA gained new energy and momentum as a result of its first successful outreach and advocacy initiative!

**Major policy change is never easy.** The *Minor's Consent Act* was first challenged in the Minnesota Legislature in 1973, again in the mid-1980s, and then each year from 2003 through 2006 legislative sessions. In earlier years, the policy debate centered on the role of parental authority and control, although the law does not preclude teens consenting for their own health to involve parents or guardians in their health care decisions. In later years, the efforts were more extreme by advancing legislation to repeal the law. In all challenges, MPHA activated its partners into a broad coalition to work as a team to defend and uphold the integrity and intent of the Act. We embraced a positive strategy, in collaboration with community partners, to demonstrate the value of the Act by assembling encounter data, evidence of policy impact (for example, research showing no link between parental notification laws with increase in teen pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections), and statements and resolutions from health, social service, professional and community groups. Coordinated testimony and letters of support were presented to key committees in the Minnesota Legislature along with personal letters and having in-person conversations with legislators.

It is no accident that over 41 years or four decades later we stand on the shoulders of our MPHA past president leaders, Dr. Arvid Houglum, Bob Schwanke and Tom Webber, for their unwavering vision,

courage, and persistence to get the vital *Minor's Consent Act* passed and to support MPHA advocacy efforts to keep it intact!

**Ongoing education strategies will help raise awareness levels.** In the mid-2000s, several MPHA past presidents, directed and guided by Ellen Benavides, joined together to design an innovative communication strategy to increase the understanding and value of the *Minor's Consent Act* as a basis to spur action about the potential repeal of the long-standing law. In early 2005, MPHA convened a roundtable discussion, inviting persons with differing perspectives to exchange views about the social values and data underlying their opinions about the importance and provisions of the *Minor's Consent Act*. Two persons served as a main spokesperson for their perspective to keep the Act as it is or to amend it, with this person extending an invitation to four additional persons such as teens, parents, physicians, nurses, legislators to join in the moderated conversation. Observers had an opportunity to generate questions and issues as part of the interactions. This forum was videotaped so that segments could be included in the *Minnesota Confidential* documentary.

*Minnesota Confidential*, a 30-minute film that showcases interviews with teens, parents, practitioners, and policy makers talking about their views honestly, openly and respectfully, accompanied by a guidebook, premiered in January 2006 at a event sponsored by MPHA and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and many co-sponsors. Later it was shown on *Public Health Journal*, hosted by Dr. Ed Ehlinger (presently Commissioner of Health), on Cable Channel 6 in the twin cities metropolitan area. Both the film and guidebook were distributed widely to audiences such as health providers, elected officials (legislators, local officials), funders, advocates, and general public. This unique initiative had an important impact in the Minnesota Legislature as no changes were enacted to the *Minor's Consent Act*! Take a few minutes to watch the video and read the guidebook that contains a wealth of information and resources (under Communications & Publications on the new MPHA website: [www.mpha.net](http://www.mpha.net)). These documents are every bit as relevant and useful today!

**Teens need access to health services in which confidential care is guaranteed.** Growing up is tricky business for teens as they experience changes in a growing body and brain, building trust and relationships, and exploring interests and life-goals. Gloria Ferguson of HealthStart School-Based Clinics in the City of St. Paul described a healthy teen as “has knowledge (about risk behaviors and consequences), resources and motivation to take good care of themselves with long-term sustainability.” While the risk behaviors of sexually-transmitted infections, substance abuse, early sexual activity, emotional health are still present, new risks are emerging. These include: early exposure to violence on TV and in video games, cyber- bullying (tragic suicides can result), unhealthy nutrition and eating, self-mutilation, homelessness, and accidental injury. While change is essential for healthy transition to adulthood, it can also increase vulnerability, especially for teens where social conditions in families, schools and communities are fragmented or dysfunctional. Teens need to feel connected to parents or guardians, family, teachers, and as many adults as they will let into their lives. Research shows that this important connection factor helps reduce engaging in risky health behavior.

To close these thoughts---

***It matters that MPHA has had, and continues to have, a strong voice for protecting the rights of teens to access confidential health services! Let's keep our teens healthy!***

Donna Anderson  
MPHA Past President