

## Speaking of your liver, why not take care of it?

### Keeping your body's processor in order

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The informational coloring books feature “Liv” and “Lucky” doing things kids typically do, like eating, playing and riding a bike. But Liv and Lucky are not children. They are livers, and in 21 pages they teach children — and, in many cases, adults — about the liver’s functions and how to care for it.

“You have to keep it short, simple and appealing to keep people’s attention,” said Thelma King Thiel, chairwoman and chief executive officer of the Silver Spring-based Hepatitis Foundation International, which created the coloring books. “If you want to motivate people to change their behaviors, they’ve got to be able to relate to it.”

For 12 years, HFI has trained health care professionals, nurses, educators and counselors across the United States and the world to raise awareness about viral hepatitis and promote liver



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*Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette*  
Thelma King Thiel, founder and chief executive officer of Hepatitis Foundation International, stands in front of a picture her son, Dean, who died of a rare liver disease 40 years ago.

wellness. And for three times as long, Thiel has traveled across the country preaching the same messages with a mix of medical facts, easy-to-grasp analogies and her own inviting yet authoritative speaking manner.

“If you saw a man with a crowbar and a mask on, would you invite him in your house to smash your pantry, your stove, your refrigerator, your food processor? Could you live in that house?” asked Thiel, 80, in her rapid-fire delivery. “Well, when you’re inviting a virus to come in [to your body] through an IV needle or through a tattoo or under the covers, you’re inviting that virus to come in and smash your pantry, your food processor and your garbage disposal, because this is what your liver is.”

Thiel’s efforts, which have resulted in her being admiringly referred to as the “Liver Lady,” are in honor of her son Dean, the youngest of her three children, who died of a rare liver disease on Christmas Eve 1970. “It touched my life and we’re doing a lot of wonderful things as a tribute to my son,” said Thiel, who has two other children and three grandchildren.

Dean died before his fifth birthday of biliary atresia, a gastrointestinal disorder that was a result of the bile ducts outside of his liver being destroyed before he was born. During her son’s illness, Thiel could find little information about the liver in medical journals and, although she was a registered nurse, had a hard time understanding meetings between Dean’s doctors.

“I tried to figure out, ‘What could I tell people about the liver that could get people interested in my cause, which was trying to raise money for liver research?’” Thiel said.

The answer was to discuss the liver’s important functions in everyday life using practical terms. “If you cut yourself shaving, you’d be mopping up your chin all day if not for the liver making a clotting factor,” Thiel said as one example.

Thiel describes the liver as an “internal chemical power plant,” and its cells “employees.” Viruses and drugs kill off employees at the power plant until there are too few healthy employees left, causing the power plant to shut down.

One of the biggest aids in her mission has been the cartoon liver character, an idea that came to Thiel in the middle of the night 26 years ago. The character has been adopted in many countries across the world, she said, and is a major way HFI provides information for people to become responsible for their own health care. “You can’t change what you don’t know, and [people] don’t know how to take care of themselves,” Thiel said.

Along with the coloring books, HFI has produced brochures and 14 films (including a hip-hop one) about liver wellness in multiple languages.

Frieda E. Cooney, the health education teacher at Gaithersburg Middle School, has been using HFI’s films in her classes for five years.

“They teach to all different types of backgrounds and multiple levels of intelligence,” she said. “They speak factually yet speak to students.”

Cooney met Thiel several years ago when Thiel spoke at a training session for Montgomery County teachers. Since then, HFI has used students in Cooney’s classes for focus groups about its films.

The response from all of Cooney’s students to the videos has been positive, she said, and helps them learn at an early age the dangers of hepatitis and the risky behavior that can lead to the disease.

“Our students need to know why ... they shouldn’t be piercing each other’s ears or cutting one another,” she said.

Because of Thiel, Cooney wondered how she ever went through a school year without teaching about hepatitis, noting it can be discussed as a disease and as part of teaching students how to deal with an illness in their family. “[Thiel] is a driving force behind the improvements in changing how we teach about hepatitis,” Cooney said.

Thiel started HFI 12 years ago after leaving the American Liver Foundation, which she founded and ran the previous 15 years. Originally based in New Jersey, where she lived, Thiel and HFI moved to Washington, D.C., to be closer to Capitol Hill at the recommendation of its board of directors, which includes former Surgeon General C. Everett Coop and other doctors and liver experts from around the world.

Thiel's ultimate goal is to get the organization's programs into every school in the United States. It's a difficult task because every school system nationwide must be dealt with on an individual basis, but Thiel feels getting the message out to the schools is vital to the cause. "If we're going to stop the hemorrhage of drug abuse and hepatitis, we've got to start in the schools," she said.

More than 500 teachers in Maryland have learned about liver wellness through HFI, and Thiel said she wants nurses at schools everywhere to use her organization's materials.

"How can they teach about this vital organ if they don't know?" she said. "We just have to be aware we have a responsibility to take care of our own liver."

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