

PRESS RELEASE

Students conduct educational fair to screen for Jewish genetic diseases

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By Meredith Fraser

TALLAHASSEE, FL - Student groups often host events that interest their members, but the Jewish Medical Students' Association at Florida State University recently held an educational fair that offered an invaluable gift: a free genetic screening. Most people are not aware that approximately one in five Jewish people carries the gene for a Jewish genetic disease – that is, a disease that occurs far more often within the Ashkenazi Jewish population. Approximately six out of seven Jews in America are classified as Ashkenazi, meaning they have Eastern or Central European ancestry. Jewish people often marry someone within their ethnic group, and there's a higher likelihood those couples will produce a child prone to developing a Jewish genetic disease. Understandably, this issue causes great anxiety for prospective parents. So one day this spring, along with the FSU Jewish Student Union, the association had an educational fair to try to lessen those worries. The fair offered information and blood work provided free by the Victor Center, dedicated to the prevention and eventual eradication of these disorders. Throughout the day, the Victor Center put on three presentations. At each session a center representative explained how genetic diseases work and options for anyone who tests positive as a carrier. After attending a presentation session and speaking with a genetic counselor, any Jewish attendee between ages 18 and 44 was eligible for a genetic screening. In a process that costs the Victor Center about \$2,000 per person, five vials of blood are drawn and sent to the center's lab at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. Analysts then determine whether a gene for any one of 11 Jewish disorders is present. Second-year student David Snipelisky organized the event with the help of first-year students Michael Silverstein, Brett Howard and Ben Greif. "Almost every Jewish medical student came to the event and got tested, as well as a few faculty members," said Snipelisky. "We had more interest and participation than we could have hoped for. We also had an extra 10 to 20 people, whether undergrads or community members, who came to just sit in and learn what Jewish genetic disorders are all about." Approximately 50 people got tested, according to Snipelisky. At \$2,000 a test, the Victor Center provided more than \$100,000 worth of genetic information. After the analysis is completed, a genetic counselor from the center calls each participant and goes over the results. Tay-Sachs disease and cystic fibrosis are the most commonly known Jewish genetic diseases, but many other disorders are more common in the Jewish population, such as Crohn's disease or Bloom's disease. Since its founding in 2002, the Victor Center has kept a record of the diagnosis rate. "One statistic the center said during their presentation is that cystic fibrosis cases dropped by about 90 percent just since testing began," Snipelisky said. "So just by informing the public and telling tested people that, 'Hey, you may be a carrier and these are your options,' it does, in the end, drop the overall prevalence of the disorders." For more information on the Victor Center or Jewish genetic diseases, please visit <http://www.victorcenters.org>