Utah pediatrician combats secondhand smoke

by Heather May
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It bothered Kevin Nelson to see so many children with asthma at Primary Children’s Medical Center who struggled to breathe and whose parents said they smoked.

Parents would tell the pediatric resident, “I smoke, but only outside.” But smoke lingering on the breath or clothes of someone nearby can harm the lungs of an asthmatic. So Nelson decided to do something about it — and his efforts have won him a national award.

The 38-year-old’s brainchild, Pediatricians Against Secondhand Smoke (PASS), has earned him an Anne E. Dyson Child Advocacy Award from the Medical Students, Residents and Fellowship Trainees section of the American Academy of Pediatrics. He will receive the award Oct. 2 at the national pediatrics conference in San Francisco. PASS aims to educate pediatricians on how to encourage parents to quit smoking.

Although Utah has the lowest smoking rates for adults and teens in the country, 15,000 children are exposed to secondhand smoke annually, according to the Utah Department of Health. Children at highest risk of exposure are minorities and those whose families have low incomes, because those factors put adults at greater risk of smoking.

Secondhand smoke can be a cause in ear infections, cancer and heart disease, according to the American Cancer Society. For asthmatics, it can trigger attacks ranging from coughing, chest tightness and wheezing to trouble breathing. After wondering what was available to help pediatricians talk to parents who smoke, and finding little, Nelson created PASS. Other founders include fellow pediatric residents Laura Duty, Clarisa Garcia and Robyn Nolan, and faculty advisers Wendy Hobson and Karen Buchi.

The group plans to survey pediatricians in the valley about their attitudes and practices on intervening, and will use the information to develop training materials.

This fall, PASS will implement a pilot project at a yet-to-be-named pediatric clinic in the Salt Lake Valley. It will likely be in a neighborhood where the smoking rate meets or exceeds the national average of 20.6 percent. There are a handful of spots in Salt Lake County where smoking rates are around 20 percent, compared with Utah’s average of 9 percent. Providers ranging from medical assistants to doctors will be trained to ask every parent about his or her child’s exposure to smoke. Staff will assess the parent’s willingness to quit and refer them to help.

The state health department applauds the effort. “It’s important for physicians to talk to the parents about this,” said Rebecca Jorgensen, of the Utah Asthma Program. “I don’t think parents always connect their behavior with their child’s health or the illness they have. … If there’s anything that could motivate someone to quit smoking, it would be the well-being of their child.”

hmay@sltrib.com