

Exploring Careers in Healthcare & Onward (ECHO): A community outreach program to promote healthcare career interest in K-8 students surrounding the CU Anschutz medical campus

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Background

Early exploration can strongly influence children's career development. Past research suggests that children of low socioeconomic status (SES) have a relative lack of exposure to the healthcare environment, which has been adversely associated with healthcare career interest. Many have examined the importance of promoting early interest in healthcare careers, particularly as a strategy to address shortages of healthcare professionals practicing in low socioeconomic areas. While most research examines career interventions in teenage adolescents, there is a relative lack of such interventions geared towards the elementary and middle-aged population.

Objectives

Our community outreach program is designed to introduce basic physiological concepts and explore careers in healthcare through hands-on experiments. The aim is to increase exposure and interest in healthcare careers in elementary- and middle-aged students.

Methods

From December 2024 to September 2025, ECHO organized three career fairs at libraries and elementary schools in Aurora County. Participants were recruited through advertising at partnering schools and libraries, most of which have a large population of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The event offered four activities: "Build Your Own Stethoscope" (Cardiology), "Learn About Lungs" (Pulmonology), "Make a Surgeon's Bracelet" (Surgery), and "All About Reflexes" (Neurology). Each activity was led by 2-4 volunteer medical students or physicians from the CU Anschutz medical campus. Following completion of the fair, participants completed anonymous post-event surveys that evaluated interest in the activities offered and medical professions before and after the career fair.

Results

Between December 2024 and September 2025, 50 elementary and middle school students participated and completed post-event surveys at three ECHO career fairs. There was a 108% increase in "Yes" responses to the question "I am interested in a career where I grow up to be a doctor" following the event. This increase in reported healthcare career interest was statistically significant ($p=0.0086$). Relative popularity of activities followed the same pattern as reported interest in specific careers in medicine, with the surgery activity and profession being the most

popular activity table and career, followed by cardiology, neurology, and pulmonology. The most frequently cited reason for why a favorite activity was chosen was “The activity was the most fun.”

Conclusions

Our post-survey results demonstrate a significant increase in healthcare career interest following completion of the ECHO career fair curriculum. By offering opportunities for students surrounding the CU Anschutz medical campus to engage in healthcare career-oriented learning experiences, ECHO can empower youth to pursue careers in healthcare in their professional futures.