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HEALTH

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Treatment Program To Watch

'Medutainment' Talk Show Debuts

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In the family of former relationship talk show host JoAnne Hart-Rogers, more popularly known as Mother Love, diabetes was lightheartedly downplayed as "just a little sugar." But after her diagnosis with the disease in 1990, the woman known for making audiences laugh knew it was time to pay attention. "I decided I didn't want to be dead," she said.

Now, she is taking that same mix of humor and frankness to a new forum: "dLife: For Your Diabetes Life," a new talk show for and about people with diabetes.

The weekly show is being marketed as "medutainment" — a term of entertainment designed primarily to convey medical information. As the first talk show to focus solely on diabetes, "dLife" has a huge potential audience: 13 million U.S. adults and children who have the disease and 5.2 million still undiagnosed. Practically all hosts and guests on "dLife" have diabetes, as do studio audience members, and they all check their blood sugar levels right in the New York studio.

It's a new take on the idea of using television shows, movies, and computer and video games to educate consumers by engaging and amusing them.

There have long been efforts to tailor video games to children with chronic illnesses like diabetes and asthma, but sponsors' interest and development of these projects have increased with new technologies. Some Web sites and such new kids' DVDs as "Escape from Obeez City" have made their content interactive to teach people healthy habits.

The talk show is meant to give people with diabetes advice over and above what they get from their doctors. "They're not getting [enough of] it through the health care system, [but] they can get it through media," said dLife's president and CEO Howard Steinberg, a veteran of the advertising and marketing industries who has type 1 diabetes. "A lot of people are coming back to us and saying, 'Thank you. I don't feel so lonely anymore.'"

Some nonprofit groups collaborate with media firms to create entertainment that delivers health messages. Other ventures, like dLife — a division of Connecticut-based LifeMed Marketing — are commercial enterprises that produce programs and sell advertising and sponsorship to groups that want to reach people with a particular disease or condition.

The use of entertainment to convey health messages has "increased markedly" in recent years, according to the nonprofit Kaiser Family

Foundation (KFF). The foundation studies a concept known by several names — edutainment, infotainment and entertainment education — on which dLife's medutainment format puts a new spin. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Entertainment Education Program reports that 88 percent of Americans learn about health issues from television.

Victoria Rideout, vice president and director of a program to study entertainment media and health at KFF, said that entertainment education serves an important purpose at a time when Americans spend many hours watching TV and playing video games.

"When information is included in entertainment media, it can address issues in a way that a pamphlet can-



Mother Love, a co-host of dLife, a talk show for and about diabetics.

dLife Program Formula: All Glucose All the Time

not,” said Rideout, KFF collaborates with producers to integrate health messages into TV shows like “ER” and on cable channels such as MTV and Black Entertainment Television.

Game Plan

Eileen O’Neill, senior vice president and general manager at Discovery Health Channel, said that about 50 to 60 percent of the channel’s programming is edutainment. Many such shows have a reality-TV feel such as “Plastic Surgery: Before & After,” which features real patients before, during and after cosmetic surgery. Unlike newer forms of medutainment, Discovery programs are more documentary in nature, and the channel covers a range of personal health topics, rather than one specific disease or condition.

“dLife” is considered a “time buy,” in which the production firm purchases airtime from a network or station (CNBC, in this case) and provides the show ready-made with all advertising in place. Advertisers include Abbott Diabetes Care, which sells glucose monitoring equipment, as well as Atkins Nutritionals, Drugstore.com, Colgate-Palmolive and eight other firms.

Rideout said she has some concerns about the involvement of advertisers with a stake in the market for treating a condition.

“Issues of product placement and blurring the line between advertising and content is something where we have to tread very carefully,” she said.

Steinberg said in an e-mail interview that sponsors do not influence the content of “dLife” and that the program needs their funding to distribute “a lot [of] good information for people with diabetes.”

“We are not a creation of the pharmaceutical or device companies but a wholly independent entity that has

found a way to better serve a community in need of health information and motivation,” Steinberg said.

It is not uncommon for drug companies to back such projects.

Through a combination of funding from such companies and grants from the National Institutes of Health, Debra Lieberman, a media researcher and professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, helped develop video games for children and adolescents with asthma and diabetes. The games were sold to health care providers, who distributed them to children.

Video games with a “socially conscious” purpose are referred to as “serious games” and are attracting more widespread funding as their health benefits are assessed and proven.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation last year awarded a \$250,000 grant to Digital Mill, a company involved in Games for Health, which encourages the development of health education games.

Lieberman studied edutainment video games’ effectiveness at getting children to better manage their conditions. One subject of her research was “Packy & Marlon,” an adventure game in which kids play the role of a character with diabetes whose condition they manage by measuring his sugar levels, selecting his food and administering his insulin.

In an analysis published in 2001 in the journal *Ambulatory Care Management*, Lieberman wrote that in several clinical trials, children and adolescents had reduced emergency and urgent care

visits and learned about health and self-care after playing “health education video games aimed at asthma self-management, diabetes self-management, and smoking prevention.”

Lieberman said video games are often the “last step of motivation” for children and adolescents reluctant to do the things they know they should do for their health. She thinks games could help adults, too, though that hasn’t been studied much yet.

“Insulot”—a word play on “insulin” and “slot machine”—is a cell phone game that teaches people with diabetes about how different foods change how much insulin they require. Researchers studied the effects of the game in 30 Japanese diabetes patients ages 12 to 24. About 80 percent of Insulot players reported that the game was “useful as a learning tool,” according to a letter the researchers wrote that was published in March in the journal *Diabetes Care*.

Laugh Therapy

“dLife” doesn’t cater to a specific age group, and the audience typically includes both adults and children. The show features co-hosts Mother Love and Nicole Johnson Baker, an author and 1999 Miss America.

Regular contributors include Bob Arnot—a doctor and the only person



Comedian J. Anthony Brown, with microphone, hears from a dLife audience member at a taping in May.

on the show who does not have diabetes—as well as Gary Hall Jr., a former Olympic swimmer; J. Anthony Brown, a comedian and co-host of the Tom Joyner radio show; and Jim Turner, an actor.

The hosts and contributors say the reason they've chosen such a public outlet to discuss their disease is simple: so many people have diabetes but many are not taking proper care of themselves.

"I wasn't trying to be the poster child for diabetes," said Mother Love of her participation in "dLife." After years of "living to eat" and gaining excess weight, she said, she decided to start "eating to live" after her diabetes diagnosis. She wants "dLife" to help viewers learn.

"When you do it in an entertaining way," she said, "people will listen." ■

Resources

■ www.dlife.com Provides information about the "dLife" talk show, radio spots and newsletter.

■ www.obeezcity.com Interactive Web site for a new kids' DVD.

■ www.socialimpactgames.com

Web site for a group that describes itself as a "catalyst for ideas and innovation" in encouraging use of games "for more than just entertainment." The site has links to Web- and software-based games designed to educate people about medical conditions and therapies. ■