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'PILL PUSHERS' IN HS SUICIDE-SCREENING PROGRAM

SUSAN EDELMAN. *New York Post*. New York, N.Y.: Dec 5, 2004. pg. 007

A Columbia University psychiatrist who has advised drug companies and calls himself a "big proponent" of antidepressants wants to expand his suicide-screening program to thousands of kids in public and parochial high schools.

Dr. David Shaffer, Columbia's chief of child psychiatry, contends his TeenScreen program can save young lives. But some critics blast it as "a way to put more people on prescription drugs."

About 500 teens were given the TeenScreen questionnaire last spring in four city schools: Park East HS, Millennium HS and Middle School 56 in Manhattan, and Banana Kelly Collaborative HS in The Bronx, The Post has learned.

Shaffer is also offering to bring the program, now in 41 states, to thousands more teens in both public and Archdiocese of New York high schools. "Kids who think about suicide often don't tell other people," Shaffer said. "This is a way to get kids with depression into treatment."

Under the program, students whose parents have given permission for the screening fill out a brief questionnaire in school asking things like whether they have suffered severe depression in the last few months or thought about killing themselves.

Students who answer yes, or say they want help for depression, are interviewed on the spot by a mental-health professional. Based on that assessment, kids may be referred to an outside psychiatric clinic.

But some critics are suspicious of the screenings. "It's just a way to

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put more people on prescription drugs," said Marcia Angell, a medical ethics lecturer at Harvard Medical School and author of "The Truth About Drug Companies." She said such programs will boost the sale of antidepressants like Paxil, Zoloft and Prozac even after the FDA in September ordered a "black box" label warning that the pills might spur suicidal thoughts or actions in minors.

Shaffer called the evidence against antidepressants "not so convincing," but insisted that TeenScreen has no say in what medication, if any, kids get.

[Illustration]

DR. DAVID SHAFFER Antidepressant advocate.

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