

Health Wise (Not Otherwise)

By Dr Daniel Fung, Deputy Editor



A doctor fell into a well and broke his collar bone. Moral of the story: doctors should heal the sick And leave the Well alone.

When I first read this rhyme, it seemed like a useful joke to implore doctors not to over-treat. I know that the White Paper on Affordable Health Care in 1992 reminded doctors that as a profession, there was a danger that services, if purely driven by profit, would result in doctors driving up the demand for services that had higher cost recovery ratios.

But for today, treating the well has taken on a new meaning. We are being reminded that the best medical service is the one that treats less and less patients until the hospitals are empty. Obviously, practice is not as simplistic as that, and we are aware that many medical conditions are not preventable as they have genetic causes or are the results of accidents. But the principle of prevention is coming sharply into focus these days. The emphasis on a healthy lifestyle to prevent illness is an important one.

There are a few ways to look at a healthy lifestyle, which relates to doctors, and I would like to share my thoughts.

Prevention is not just about doing things proactively; it is also about avoiding harmful behaviours. It is wonderful to see many people exercising regularly and having muscular and well-toned physiques. Physical fitness appears to be equated to physical health. This is not always true. I wonder if we ask the "beautiful bodies" that adorn our *Sunday Times* every week whether they keep late nights, drink excessively or smoke, how many will answer in the negative. Proper nutrition, rest and reduction of harmful habits are harder to maintain, but equally important for preventing disease. What about the more subtle self-destructive behaviours such as marital conflicts, malicious gossiping or hospital politics?

A healthy lifestyle includes both physical and emotional health. To me, this is not just the absence of illness, it also means feeling good about ourselves, having good, supportive and meaningful relationships, and coping with all the trials and tribulations that life can throw at us. In order to achieve this balanced concept of health, we must not just sign up for a personal trainer. We need to exercise discipline in seeking out a balance in all the myriad demands of life.

Doctors should practise what they preach. Some of my friends have asked me why doctors do not seem to attend healthy lifestyle activities. For want of a better example, it is the obese doctor who tells patients to lose weight. Should doctors set the benchmark for leading healthy lifestyles? Surely, if we are the scientists that we promote ourselves to be, we should also live a life that promotes good health. The argument has always been that knowing what to do is different from doing it, and we cannot go against the genetics argument (I was born this way). But again, a healthy lifestyle is not just about jogging regularly or swimming 10 laps for a proper cardiovascular workout. These are the easy parts. We should consider other important lifestyle decisions such as our own habits (eating, drinking and so on), relationships (Do we treat our friends well? Are we helping our younger colleagues acquire relevant skills?), and work (Do we overwork ourselves to the detriment of our social and family life?).

I do feel bad when I need to turn down people who make a request from me. As a doctor, I feel it is my calling to attend to the needy. However, I am also very cognizant of the fact that my rapidly growing young brood needs to have a father around them. Finding the balance is always a hard fight but it is an important one. I guess the hardest dictum for doctors remain that which says: "Physician heal thyself." ■



About the author: Daniel has lived 38 years on this third rock from the sun. He lives in Bukit Timah and has learned a lot about wildlife at the nearby reserve – but mostly by having children (especially when all five are together). His wife and constant companion, Joyce, makes sure he is down to earth and does not rest on his laurels (and Hardies). He can be contacted at email: daniel_fung@imh.com.sg.