



More Thought and Less Care

Dr. Mark Cucuzzella, FAAFP, Associate Professor of Family Medicine
West Virginia School of Medicine

Mark Cucuzzella, MD, FAAFP is a family physician in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia and an associate professor at West Virginia University School of Medicine. He has been a competitive runner for nearly 30 years, completing over 50 marathons and ultras, and continues to compete as a national level masters (age 40 plus) runner. He has a string of 21 consecutive years running a marathon in under 2:35, except for the year of his medical internship.

Dr. Cucuzzella is the lead recipient of a large Robert Wood Johnson Foundation "Healthy Kids Healthy Communities" grant which aims to halt the current national epidemic of childhood obesity. He has been awarded the US Air Force Athlete of the Year in 1997, the Family Physician Teacher of the Year for the state of Colorado in 2000, and was recently named as the Harpers Ferry National Park Volunteer of the Month.

In his daily practice, Dr. Cucuzzella encourages walkers and runners at all levels of ability. He teaches classes on "Exercise is Medicine" and healthier and pain-free running. He received his undergraduate and medical degrees at the University of Virginia and spent 10 years as an active duty family physician and flight surgeon in the US Air Force before entering civilian academic practice. As a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force Reserves, he is coach and captain of their marathon team and designs programs to reduce running injuries in military personnel.

Nearly 20 years ago I entered family medicine with a vision of shaping healthier individuals and communities. Over this period, our disease-based health care has devolved into a complex, disjointed, horribly expensive and, by current evidence, an often dangerous mix of medications, tests, specialists, shifting payers and complex rules. Even the often-used term *preventive care* being discussed in think tanks implies that the ticket to better health is dependant on the *care*, e.g., screening and exams, which a health provider gives to an individual. This style of *preventive care* is, at best, early detection of something that may or may not cause you problems later; it is not true *prevention*.

What is often surprising to the public is that the ritual annual "physical" has not been shown to save lives or decrease costs and that accepted screening tests, e.g., cholesterol, colonoscopy, PSA, pap smears and even mammograms, unfortunately are blunt tools at best and, at worst, lead to costly and painful interventions and treatments when applied broadly to well populations.

Without debate are the benefits of a comprehensive healthy lifestyle in many societies throughout the world that share common practices. This is true prevention. Massive longitudinal studies have been carried out in thousands of patients over decades, such as the Okinawa Centenarian Study, the HALE Project, the EPIC/Norfolk UK Study, the MacArthur Study of Successful Aging, revolutionary studies performed by Ralph Paffenbarger (Harvard Alumni Study) and studies of the Cooper Institute.

A recent book called *The Blue Zones* (<http://www.bluezones.com>) highlights several healthy populations throughout the world. There is nothing new and innovative in their traditional

healthy lifestyles. They do moderate physical activity their entire life, eat a plant-based diet, do not smoke, maintain their weight, some have a drink a day and provide lifelong care to their fellow citizens. There is something magical about the elderly being woven into their culture in a valuable and serving way, not left forgotten and at the mercy of a corps of medical providers. A perfect example is Clarice Morant, who recently died at 104. She took care of two, similarly-aged family members in her own home after she reached the age of 100. In *giving* care, Clarice *received* life and health.

So as the health care policy makers and interest groups debate over who will pay for the inefficient and costly *care*, maybe we need to give more *thought* into how we live, and promote policies and programs that support an active and healthy lifestyle for all generations. Current health care reimbursement is compensated by *how much care* (i.e. tests, procedures, drugs, devices) we deliver; not by the thought, effort and outcomes achieved.

In our rural county of West Virginia, we are a finalist in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation initiative called "Healthy Kids Healthy Communities." The first phase of our project, titled "Wild and Wonderful Trails for Every Child," involves building a fitness trail and community garden at every school and park in the county. We have a four-year plan to reshape the built environment and nutritional policies to align with the principles of healthy living. Our focus extends the *medical home* into the *medical home's backyard*, with a collaboration of over 30 community partners, all with common interest in preserving the health of our families and the environment we live in.

The grant activities will support accessible, after school programs on the local trails, to build



Dr. Cucuzzella runs with community children during a weekly fun run

family fitness; teach nutrition through “edible” gardens; and hopefully reestablish the connection between children and nature. The initiative will designate safe routes to school for walking and biking, gather and distribute donor bikes to area kids so they can use these routes and, over time, hopefully change the culture of how the community lives. The vision is for a ring of trails, initially focused around the schools, eventually expanding and connecting as the community sees the value not just in health, but also in the aesthetic and economic impact provided by a pedestrian- and bike-friendly community.

In line with changing the culture, we also planned a large event focused on community fitness for all – Freedom’s Run (www.freedomrun.org). We hold weekly fun runs and teach classes to help all abilities succeed in their individual goals. This idea of all-inclusive family jogs was first born in New Zealand, under the legendary coach and mentor, Author Lydiard (<http://www.lydiardfoundation.org>).

Lydiard started the Auckland Joggers Club in the 1950s, mostly out of a desire to rehabilitate heart attack victims (a wildly controversial concept at the time, now a standard of care). His Sunday morning gatherings of young, old, walkers, joggers and a few serious runners became a weekly party. If you visit New Zealand today, similar groups gather in small towns throughout the country, and the health of the nation benefits in this active, social play.

In 1962 the legendary University of Oregon coach (and Nike founder), Bill Bowerman, traveled to New Zealand to observe Lydiard’s coaching technique for Olympic-level athletes. What Bill really discovered was the *jogging* movement of the citizens, inspiring him to write “*Jogging*,” a 60-page pamphlet which quickly became a bestseller – and gave birth to a new word and lifestyle. Bill himself could barely cover a half-mile the first day, but after several months of easy and fun running, he was 30 pounds lighter, renewed and able to jog for miles.

Bowerman began hosting Friday evening jogs in his Eugene community. At first, only a few gathered, but soon hundreds appeared at the Oregon track to head out on the local routes. Eugene is now recognized around the world for its trails, recreation and community health. Bowerman started a culture change simply, with the Friday jogs and this call to action: “If you have a body, you are an athlete.”

Our small county’s plan can be a model for any community, urban or rural. Perhaps the *thought* we put into this local initiative could be translated into a larger national forum ... and maybe in the future we will be providing less *care*, like they do in Okinawa. ♪