

EXERCISE IS MEDICINE

Exercise is Medicine. Exercise is medicine, you might ask? We triathletes exercise and we don't regard it as medicine (at least I hope that not too many of us do). However, in the context of our ever more sedentary society, the American College of Sports Medicine has launched a program by that name that is aimed at getting Americans off the couch.

"Well," you might say, "there are tons of programs like that around, and they don't seem to be having much success."

And you would be right. But this new program is different. It is aimed first, not at the general public but at the health professions. It is designed to enlist the health professions in an organized way to help people become more physically active. Studies have shown that this can be helpful. You can find an introduction at <http://www.exerciseismedicine.org/about.htm>.

The vision of the program "is to make physical activity and exercise a standard part of a disease prevention and treatment medical paradigm in the United States." Just think. You would go into your doctor's office and as well as taking your blood pressure, counting your pulse and respiratory rates, weighing you and such, given that level of physical activity has such a close relationship to health at all ages, you would be asked, every time, about yours.

Last fall, the Department of Health and Human Services came out with the first Guidelines for Physical Activity (<http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines>). They are very useful for the health care professional as well as the general public for determining what one needs to do to achieve what, in terms of health and fitness. For achieving the minimum recommended level of 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity exercise, a prescription can be written, just like a prescription for a medication.

There are two approaches to exercising regularly that people who are not presently exercising regularly can use (and indeed they can be mixed and matched). One is the "Lifestyle Exercise" approach, building bouts of exercise into one's pattern of daily living, like using the stairs instead of the elevator, parking as far away as possible in the lot at one's place of work, and getting off public transport one stop early. The other is what we triathletes/duathletes do, dubbed the "Scheduled Leisure Time" approach by Exercise is Medicine.

"But," you might say, "my doc (or other primary care provider or chiropractor or even some physical therapists and

athletic trainers) doesn't know very much about helping people to become regular exercisers." And you would be right. Not too many health care practitioners do. That's where this program comes in. It is designed to educate and train clinicians of all kinds in how to effectively provide the exercise prescription in clinical practice. My connection with the program is through Dr. Edward Phillips, Director of the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine at Harvard. I was asked to write the textbook that supports the program. Entitled ACSM's Exercise is Medicine®: A Clinician's Guide to Exercise Prescription, it was published this past March by Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins.

Now where do triathlon/duathlon and multisport athletes come in? In several places. First, I am delighted to say USA Triathlon is one of the official Supporting Organizations for the program and the book. Second, multisport training is considered by many to be the ideal way to work out on a schedule over a long period of time. With swimming, cycling and running plus the weight training that some of us do, we know that we achieve balance among the muscle groups we use, reduce our risk of injury from overuse in any one of the sports, and reduce our chances of quitting because of the boredom that can arise from doing just one sport. And then, of course, there is the element of racing that for us makes exercising regularly that much more fun. The USA Triathlon motto, "fueling the multisport lifestyle," did not appear out of thin air.

Third, USAT members can play an important role in making their own health care practitioners aware of the program and, in the context of the importance of regular exercise to all of us, urge them to get involved with it. Finally, if you are a health care practitioner yourself, you are in a prime position to become a prime mover in this new campaign to promote regular exercise through the direct intervention of the health professions. One does not have to be a regular exerciser in order to promote exercising regularly, but it sure helps. Those of us who walk the walk are that much more effective in talking the talk.

The recently reported USAT/Tribe Group study concluded: "Overall, triathlon is a vibrant, growing sport" and we are members of a "growing, vibrant, and passionate" community. Indeed, we are poised not only to "fuel the healthy lifestyle" for ourselves, but by example help to fuel it for our nation as a whole as well. ■

Well, YOU might say,
there are TONS of
PROGRAMS like that
around, and they don't
seem to be HAVING
much SUCCESS.