

An Idea Whose Time Had Come

Category: Exercise

written by Joseph Fennelly | July 10, 2021

A half century ago, exercise had little place in medical care. Months of rest were for advised for TB, women spent weeks in bed after giving birth, and three weeks of bed rest was typical after a heart attack (as was a reduced likelihood of returning to many forms of employment).

At that time, a team of us started a cardiac rehab program based at Morristown Medical Center. It involved both professionals and laypeople.

Immediately after a patient suffered an acute heart attack, I would try to match them with a former cardiac patient in a similar line of work. For example, I would match a police officer with another police officer, or, say, a pilot with a pilot. The rehabilitated patient could reassure the recent patient of a good outcome more effectively than the professionals could: expert + experience = expertise.

The program collaborated with a YMCA. At times, family members of patients were concerned about the possible risks of exercise. In order to increase cooperation, my wife, a nurse and marathoner, and I invited the significant others as well as their children to be part of the exercise program. They were educated about diet and lifestyle issues. My wife would even take the family grocery shopping.

The YMCA staff created aerobic activities such as aerobic dance, water aerobics, and square-dancing.

The patient who prompted me to start the rehab program was a Sandy Hook, New Jersey, harbor pilot. He was 39 and the father of five children under age 10 at the time of his heart attack. Still working 20 years later, he thanked me for "saving his life." I responded: "No, Charlie, you saved *my* life. I started to exercise because of you all!"

In recent years, the medical profession has been emphasizing exercise as a preventative. After all, one of the most important reasons for going to a hospital is to learn how to stay out of it the next time!

Joseph Fennelly
Madison, New Jersey