

# Editor's comment

## Tackling inactivity



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This issue of *CME* is another departure from the norm. It contains a series of articles on specific topics, mainly as updates to help the non-specialist to understand guidelines, research and so on. Inevitably, there are articles on cardiovascular disease and diabetes – two of the most common chronic conditions that present in any practice, specialist or otherwise.

Of course, these are predominantly diseases of lifestyle and so at best totally preventable and, at worst, controllable with lifestyle intervention as well as medication.

In a recent issue of the *British Medical Journal* the UK body NICE is now also taking a departure from the norm and, rather than recommending medication, is recommending approaches to get British children active again. Apparently rates of obesity among children in the UK are rocketing and one of the main causes is thought to be inactivity. The problem of course is the easy availability of television and computers – as well as a truly awful climate that doesn't exactly lend itself to outdoor pursuits!

But are these the real issues? When I was at school in the UK we had compulsory

games most afternoons, regardless of the weather. The winter sports took weather into consideration, but could be played in a blizzard if necessary! And there was no getting out of it unless you were sick or injured. I think we were all pretty fit as a result and most of us spent our free time out of doors, either walking or cycling around, in just about any weather.

I later learnt that compulsory school sports had been discontinued in the UK because schools didn't want to foster competition because the weaker children might have felt unhappy – not sure how true this is as the reason for stopping compulsory sports, but it seems like a very bad one to me.

Whatever the reasons behind stopping compulsory school sports, the massive rise in obesity among children is almost certainly related to this.

The same is true of South African schools and I remember Tim Noakes calling for compulsory school sports to be introduced some years ago. My husband tells me that even when he was at school – same era as me – sports were not compulsory, although another friend tells me that sports were compulsory at his school. Strange for a sports-mad country – but when you look

at the general physical condition of most spectators at sports events you can see that their participation is not active!

The lack of activity at school is mirrored in the home, where children are ferried by car to and from events and over distances that I would have walked or cycled as a youngster. Admittedly, it isn't safe to allow your children to walk and cycle all over the place in South Africa any more, but this is not as true in the UK or other countries where childhood obesity is becoming an issue.

What is needed is a complete change in philosophy, requiring school sports to once again become the norm and sports to become something that people participate in actively, rather than sitting and watching while eating and drinking.

There is more and more evidence accumulating to show that childhood inactivity and the resulting obesity lead to unhealthy adults, with increasing rates of chronic diseases of lifestyle across the globe as people aspire to a Western lifestyle. Making sports compulsory in schools would be a good start to overcoming this.

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