

## Better health & fitness – a personal journey

### Dr Tim Foo

‘You look so fit and well, how did you do it?’ patients have asked recently. They have noticed not only my changed body shape and leaner figure but also felt the increased energy and vibrancy that I now radiate. How did I do it?

Firstly, be totally committed to your own wellbeing and make it a high priority. We are all busy people with lots of demanding roles and responsibilities - patients to see, practice to run, family to care for. Yes, like most of you, I also thought that I have no time for physical exercise. Three years ago, I found that I was no longer able to work effectively. Come my third session on Monday evenings, I was feeling completely exhausted. I decided to place my own wellbeing as top priority. This decision appeared selfish initially, but I reminded myself that *‘I will be of no bloody good to my family, my patients or myself if I become physically or mentally unwell’*.

I organised for an extended lunch break on (busy) Monday to go swimming! This simple change boosted my energy levels such that I can whip through the evening session and still be bubbling with energy when I go home. This paradigm shift, especially for the older generation of doctors, from total dedication to medicine to a healthy balance between work, family and personal wellbeing being, is difficult, but vital to make.

Start by aiming to make small behavioural changes. When these changes become established and provide results, you will be motivated to make further changes. I began by cutting out potatoes (yes chips!) from my diet and replacing calrose rice with Basmati rice as part of a low GI diet, given that I was overweight and have a family history of diabetes. I then added resistance training gradually to my swimming. I was unaware of the weight that I lost until people started commenting on how loose my pants were! Over about a twelve-month period, I shed 20kgs and my waistline shrunk by 8cms. This appeared to be an unattainable goal before I started, but instead of focussing on my weight, I focussed on my behaviour, progressively adding to the small changes that I have made. This freed me from the paralysis of not making any changes for the fear of failure.

Be prepared for unexpected obstacles and always have a ‘contingency plan’. Years ago, one of my partners, who is also a GP obstetrician, and I committed to regularly swimming together in the early mornings, twice a week. We succeeded for many months, but a succession of nights up for deliveries meant that we were eventually forced to break the commitment and give up swimming. I now schedule times for five physical exercise sessions a week, on a week-by-week basis, around my other commitments. At home and work, I have reserves of healthy food (fruits, nuts, canned tuna etc) as snacks or a meal when I am unable to have my usual meal.

It's never too late to become fit. Before I committed to regular exercise again, I was concerned that I may have left my run too late – that I am too old and physical exercise may be hazardous – injuries, coronaries. However, I gained inspiration from two of my patients – a woman of 83 years who jogs 5km daily, and a 75 year–old man who spends most winter skiing. Both these remarkable people only became physically active late in life, in their 40's and 50's. Like them, I now feel more athletic than I have ever been. I can swim and ski better than I ever did, am stronger and more flexible. More importantly, I feel much more relaxed, more energetic and generally happier.

Finally, statistics show that only 45% of doctors are physically active (>20mins exercise > 3 times per week). If you are in the other 55%, I urge you to make physical exercise a priority in your life and start making changes. Adopting a healthy lifestyle acts as a powerful role model. I find patients are much more receptive to my advice regarding lifestyle changes. Unlike with smoking, where patients used to invalidate me by saying 'You have never smoked, so you don't know how hard it is to give up', I can now say 'I once was a fat, unhealthy, inactive slob but I have changed'. You can do it too!

#### Useful Websites

[www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au](http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au) – Excellent site to start.

[www.bodyforlife.com](http://www.bodyforlife.com) – If you are looking for before and after pictures to motivate you.

[www.exrx.net](http://www.exrx.net) – Comprehensive site for the fitness enthusiast

[www.glycaemicindex.com](http://www.glycaemicindex.com) – Site explaining Glycaemic Index (GI)