

United we stand

Patients meet at Ryerson United Church

BY MARCELLO PALMIERI

Wouldn't it be great if you could sit down with every patient in a relaxed atmosphere and help them fully understand complex issues affecting their health? Like drug action, how to eat right and exercise properly, and even how to navigate the latest health fads and gimmicks.

We all know this would greatly benefit patients — an informed patient is far more likely to comply with treatment and make better lifestyle choices. But where would you find the time to fit this into an already busy practice? And how could you ensure that patients are sticking to any plan you both agreed on? These obstacles haven't deterred one doctor from coming up with a creative way to his counsel patients and keep them on the road to good health.

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I'm preventing it” — Dr Curnew**

Dr Greg Curnew, a cardiologist at Hamilton General Hospital, was fed up with watching so many people die from heart disease when they might have been saved with some simple interventions, proper guidance and support earlier on.

So, back in 1995 he decided to create the LIFE (Lifestyle Intervention For Ever) program, a free adult support group and learning program designed to get its members to take charge of their health by focusing on how to prevent illness before problems start. Nine years later, the program is officially a success story — both from the patients' point of view, and Dr Curnew's. “In a hospital, I'm rushed and I just treat illness,” he explains. “But here, I'm preventing it.”

One evening each month, Dr Curnew and a group of about 50 to 125 people gather at Ryerson United Church in Hamilton to talk about health. Dr Curnew has a small team of volunteers, including his wife and some of his students, who pitch in and help make the meetings happen. They cover a variety of topics, from reversing heart disease to stress management, and also participate in fun and informative group activities. Sometimes they even take the show on the road for family picnics. Many of the members are Dr Curnew's patients but anyone is welcome to join.

MEET AND BE MERRY

The LIFE meetings kick off informally, with members choosing an activity such as walking, watching a health video, having their prescription renewed, or simply chatting together. Later they take a half hour to share a healthy low-fat meal they prepare in turns. The next couple of hours are spent at the ‘newspaper corner,’ where people bring along a health-related article they've found on the Internet or in a newspaper and discuss it. Every meeting also has a special discussion topic: at their next meeting, the group will look at the health of children and the elderly.

The program's come a long way since it started. It used to be less structured and Dr Curnew relied on an old-fashioned projector to help him conduct the meetings. Today, he's got a website (www.healthcorner.ca) with information about different illnesses, benefits of exercise, and how to plan for the next doctor or hospital visit. Dr Curnew actively encourages his own patients to attend the meetings, pointing out that it's the easiest way to see him if they're having side effects, need a prescription refilled, or just ask questions. He even has a downloadable form on the website for his patients to fax or post back two weeks before meetings outlining what they'd like to discuss with him. Members can also get their cholesterol and blood pressure levels checked and have their body fat calculated. And to change with the times, the old projector has been replaced by PowerPoint presentations.

There are big plans for the future, including cooking demonstrations, a healthy food cookbook to be released later this year, as well as a video and book on how to live longer and better that will hopefully be out next year — and maybe even on the small screen. “Many people who need the program don't come,” he notes, “so we'd like to broadcast it on TV in the near future.”

And while Dr Curnew admits it's sometimes tough to balance the program with his practice and family life, in the end he knows it's worth it. “I keep thinking that maybe I should stop the program, but the members won't let me,” he jokes. As to why the program is a hit with its members, he believes that empowering people to take an active role in their health is the key ingredient. ■