

## VicSport Update

### Putting Sport and Recreation on the Health & Education Agendas

The debate over the importance of the role physical activity plays in the promotion of better health outcomes is null and void. The most exercise resistant person in the world could mount a reasonable argument to even begin to suggest physical activity does not promote positive health outcomes.

It has been proven time and time again in study after study, physical activity improves both physical and mental health, and reduces the risk of heart disease, over-weight and obesity, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis and mental health problems.

No matter how much proof we produce regarding the positive benefits of exercise however, the reality is fewer than 40 per cent of Australians over the age of 15 participate in exercise, recreation or sport three times a week or more – the minimum recommended to maintain good health.

Unfortunately, the development of genuine participation opportunities at the grass-roots level is not increasing at the pace required to have a genuine impact on improving the health of significant numbers of Australians.

The question then is how do we get more people engaged in regular physical activity? The answer is a long-term strategic plan of attack that looks beyond the traditional systems that to date have not provided the results necessary to really force a change – a plan that relies not on the sport and recreation sector alone, but includes support from the health and education sectors as well.

Physical inactivity is having more far reaching effects that just impacting on the health of an individual. Lack of exercise is costing the health system money – a lot of money. The Department of Health and Ageing estimated the cost of treating major over-weight and obesity related illnesses in 1996 was between \$680 and \$1239 million – that's between \$38 and \$69 per person eight years ago. The mind boggles to imagine what the current costs to the health system would be.

When faced with the dilemma of spending money to save the life of a patient suffering from a massive heart attack now, versus spending money on prevention strategies to save a life 50 years down the track you can understand why more of our health money goes toward

cure rather than prevention. As the costs to our health system continue to increase, more emphasis will have to be placed on prevention. Imagine the long-term benefits that could be realised if we had \$680 million to spend on prevention!

The education sector must also take some responsibility for the promotion of physical activity. Outside of the home, it is school which has the greatest impact on the development of our children. Providing the resources necessary to ensure every school can offer physical activity opportunities to all school children is a key to improving health in the long term.

The sport and recreation sector has a vital role to play in promoting physical activity opportunities for all, however alone we do not have the resources to do everything that needs to be done. The health and education sectors have to play key roles if we are going to make significant progress in this area.

Physical inactivity is of course not the only factor impacting on health – diet and a changing social environment also play key roles. But it is a key factor. Physical activity does have a positive influence on health; and playing a game of tennis or walking the dog around the lake is more fun, and much cheaper, than a coronary bypass.

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