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Playing for Fitness – Helping Seniors Stay Active

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This past December, Gladys Burrill of the United States of America completed the Honolulu Marathon in nine hours and 53 minutes. Through exercising into her senior years, 92-year-old Burrill cemented herself in history as the oldest female to ever complete a marathon.¹ She also lowered her risk of osteoporosis, cognitive impairment, and cardiovascular disease,² conditions that affect longevity and independence. What can be done to encourage other seniors to stay active?

Jennifer Slater works as the Recreation Coordinator at Terraces on 7th, an independent and assisted living facility for seniors in Vancouver’s South Granville area. Slater coordinates a variety of events to encourage the facility’s residents to stay active. Twice per week, she leads an hour-long group fitness class where residents develop their strength, endurance, and balance



In this photo: Jennifer Slater (right), Recreation Coordinator at Terraces on 7th, created a “Fitness Stars” program to encourage participation in physical activity. Residents received a star for each program they attended. Claire Alderberg (left) achieved a Fitness Star award in March 2011.

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In this photo: Irene Denny won the “curling” game during the “Terraces Olympics”.

in order to prevent falls and improve mobility. When working with seniors, Slater notes that it is important to modify exercises to suit an individual’s functional abilities. She also encourages residents to “work at their own pace and not to look around but to look at themselves” as they participate in her classes, noting improvements in their personal skills over time.

Other successful programs at Terraces include Tai Chi classes, personal trainer sessions, a walking program, and gardening sessions. One of the biggest hits with the residents, however, is the Wii™, a video-gaming system. This device allows residents to physically mimic bowling, boxing, golf, cycling, kayaking, and tennis with a handheld controller. This is especially beneficial for residents who cannot participate in

the real-life versions of these sports due to health or mobility concerns. Although less physically taxing than a real tennis game, for example, Slater feels the Wii™ helps develop residents' hand-eye coordination skills. It also allows residents to connect with young family members who regularly use the technology.

“Targeting programming to the wants of residents” and “always making things fun” are two keys to helping seniors stay active, according to Slater. During the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, Slater coordinated a variety of social events to encourage activity. There was a “torch relay” where residents proudly wore red and white while they passed a homemade torch from the fifth floor to the main socializing area on the first floor. Residents also participated in an indoor “curling” session with balls instead of rocks and took part in “hockey drills” around pylons amongst other sports.

At Terraces, it seems that the secret to staying active lies in play. So encourage your older patients to pick up a hockey stick or a basketball; to put on their gardening gloves or grab hold of a Wii™ controller; and, of course, to find a friend or family member to join in on the fun. For, as the saying goes, “We do not stop playing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop playing.”¹

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The Federation of Medical Women of Canada

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In 1924, six distinguished female physicians led by Dr. Maude Abbott, an internationally-respected pathologist, came together at the Canadian Medical Association's Annual General Meeting and founded the Federation of Medical Women of Canada (FMWC). The organization was founded both to support the “professional, social, and personal advancement of women physicians” in Canada and to promote the “well-being of women both in the medical profession and in society at large.”¹ After over nearly a century of dedication, the FMWC continues to advocate for women physicians by providing them with a unified public voice, mentorship, and the opportunity to network with peers.

At UBC, we have a student-run branch of the FMWC, which enthusiastically supports this tradition of advocating for women physicians and medical students. Last year, the UBC FMWC created a mentor group of medical student mentees and physician mentors. The group met over a warm meal and discussed issues such as choosing a specialty, family planning, and the changing atmosphere of healthcare in Canada. After the physician mentors had divulged their pearls of wisdom to the eager mentees, the roles were reversed as the mentors became mentees on the topics of surviving the technological onslaught of internet networking. Later in the year, the mentor group met again to share one another's life passions.

Other previous UBC FMWC events have included talks

on career information and updates concerning women's health. During their “Women in Medicine” talk, the UBC FMWC invited special guests including a pediatric infectious disease specialist and a plastic surgeon who specializes in the treatment of burns. The talk provided an intimate evening of advice about future careers and the opportunity for questions. The UBC FMWC subsequently held an “Updates in Women's Health” talk that featured experts in the field of gynecological cancers, global issues in women's health, and naturopathic medicine in women's health. The talk was an informative educational experience on women's health.

In mid-September, the FMWC will have its Annual General Meeting in Vancouver. The conference will bring FMWC members from across Canada to meet for a weekend of fascinating talks, great food, and networking. Topics that will be covered range from healthcare team leadership and people management to pertinent issues of women's health such as contraception, post-menopausal fracture risk, and cervical cancer. Interspersed amongst these talks will be breaks for yoga and tai-chi as well as discourses highlighting self-care, self-improvement, and overall life balance for women physicians. The weekend will end with an uplifting examination of women as a catalyst for change, focusing on how women are shifting the curve for cancer survival through their participation in integrated cancer care services.²

For UBC FMWC members who would like to attend the Annual General Meeting, the UBC branch is offering a subsidy of \$ 25, cutting the attendance fee to just \$ 25. For more information, contact Kristin DeGirolamo at kdegir@gmail.com. For those

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