

# Life & Times

## Prescribing parkrun

Another successful Southport parkrun over and I was putting away the course signs when I noticed 15-year-old Ellie holding on to a metal lamppost with one hand and spinning round and round and round. It made me dizzy just watching. *'She always does that when she's happy'*, her mother told me:

*'With her autism it can be hard to tell sometimes but she loves running through the park, particularly when the sun coming through the trees creates dappled shade on the paths.'*

I'd first noticed Ellie at the start of this year — it was hard not to, her big, pink noise-excluding headphones made her easily spotted. Her parents running and walking alongside her were clearly working hard to keep her from becoming too agitated among the 400 or so other runners and walkers. Ellie's mother told me how proud she was that Ellie's feisty, determined spirit and fierce independence had meant that she could now complete the 5k course by herself.

### SUCCESS STORIES

I've 'prescribed' parkrun (<http://www.parkrun.org.uk>) to more than 100 of my patients in the past 2 years with some amazing successes. It started off as an informal thing, wondering with a patient whether they might be interested in giving it a go, but it is now something that I actively promote.

Starting in 2004, parkrun now has nearly 600 free, timed 5k events across the UK every single Saturday, coordinated by 14 000 volunteers every week. Although the first event 14 years ago was targeted at existing runners, 2% of participants now prefer to walk (and are welcomed) and volunteers act as Tail Walkers each week to remove the fear of finishing last. It has just celebrated signing up its 5-millionth participant and parkrun is expanding rapidly with events in 20 countries across the globe and more in the pipeline for 2019.

Sean had a massive MI in 2016 aged just 55 despite having no apparent risk factors other than a strong family history of heart disease. His subsequent heart failure and left ventricular ejection fraction of 35% was below DVLA requirements to drive and his licence had been revoked. We chatted about how parkrun could form part of his cardiac rehab and he was keen to give it a go. He started with very gentle walking but has sped up as his exercise capacity, endurance, and confidence have grown. His times for the 5k course have dropped from 56 to 35 minutes and he's thrilled to be driving again. Sean told me:

*'Parkrun has been a revelation — a key part of my recovery. The support and encouragement of all who take part has been immense and I've achieved far more than I ever dreamt possible. Not bad for a "non-runner"!'*

Excited by the possibilities that parkrun might have to offer not just for healthy people but also those with long-term conditions, the RCGP and parkrun collaborated to set up the parkrun practice initiative, which launched in June this year.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that general practices will link with their local parkrun to promote the benefits of physical activity, not just to their patients but also to GPs and practice teams too. We realised that practices would not want yet another target-driven activity so the scheme allows practices and their local parkruns to adopt whatever approach works best for them. The response has been fantastic, with nearly 500 practices already signed up and many organising a 'takeover' of the parkrun volunteer roles by staff and patients.

The positive impact of volunteering is often vastly undervalued and underused as a way of connecting with people outside or on the margins of our communities. I loved the story of Elisabeth, whose daughter Lucy collects her from her residential care home opposite Bushy Park in London and takes her across the road to cheer on the runners

and walkers, and high-five the children. The parkrun team were so impressed that they made Elisabeth an honorary marshal and bought her a high-vis vest to wear each Saturday. I know that the Christmas cards that parkrunners sent, thanking her for her involvement, overwhelmed both Elisabeth and Lucy. Atul Gawande in his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*<sup>2</sup> talks about the importance of having a purpose in life as we reach old age and I think parkrun may have supplied that for Elisabeth.

### INSPIRING ALL

With seven parkruns launched in UK prisons in the past year, parkrun offers a unique opportunity to engage with those who are incarcerated and play a key role in their rehabilitation. They also provide the opportunity for prisoners to integrate within a non-judgemental, welcoming community upon release, a community in which the former prisoner is aware of the parkrun 'model' and how it works. That's exactly what Alfie Kirkley did when he finished his sentence at HMP Haverigg. Alfie regards parkrun as a 'lifesaver' and his 'new family'. A patient of mine in her sixties with a long history of anxiety has told me that volunteering at a parkrun has completely changed her life.

I used to think that inspirational stories like these were rare and unique, but as time has gone on I've realised just how common tales like these are. It's actually the commonness and not the unusualness that's astonishing. I've seen the wonderful power of how parkrun can transform lives and I am convinced that it's the best sort of medicine I can prescribe.

#### Simon Tobin,

GP and Trainer, Norwood Surgery, Southport, parkrun Ambassador for Health and Wellbeing.

Email: [simon.tobin@parkrun.com](mailto:simon.tobin@parkrun.com)  
@DocRunner1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X700133>

### REFERENCES

1. Royal College of General Practitioners. Parkrun practice initiative. 2018. <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/our-programmes/clinical-priorities/parkrun-practice.aspx> [accessed 21 Oct 2018].
2. Gawande A. *Being mortal: medicine and what matters in the end*. London: Profile Books, 2015.

*"He started with very gentle walking but has sped up as his exercise capacity, endurance, and confidence have grown."*