PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES, LIFE EXPECTANCY, AND THE QUEEN
Environments in the UK have been designed to make our lives physically easier: cars, trains, lifts, washing machines — even the humble remote control. It’s no surprise then that around 4 out of 10 of us are inactive.1 While many people may know that physical activity is good for them, they struggle to do any. And, while the phrase ‘5-a-day’ for the consumption of fruit and veg is well known, there’s no equivalent for physical activity. Perhaps that’s why only between 8% and 18% of people in the UK were able to recall that the Chief Medical Officers’ guidance is at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week.2,3 GPs fared marginally better: just 20% could recall the guidance.5
The consequences of inactivity in our population are well known: high levels of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and poor mental health. These are self-evident and cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. While many people may know that physical activity is good for them, they struggle to do any. And, while the phrase ‘5-a-day’ for the consumption of fruit and veg is well known, there’s no equivalent for physical activity. Perhaps that’s why only between 8% and 18% of people in the UK were able to recall that the Chief Medical Officers’ guidance is at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week.2,3 GPs fared marginally better: just 20% could recall the guidance.5
The consequences of inactivity in our population are well known: high levels of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and poor mental health. These are self-evident from Fingertips, the public health statistics gateway for general practices in England. Consider, for instance, the under 75 mortality rate from preventable cardiovascular diseases. According to Fingertips, if we look at towns across the country, the mortality rate correlates linearly with inactivity with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.67$ (moderately strong).3 If inactivity increases in a town, so do preventable deaths. Given all the other determinants of health — alcohol, diet, drugs, access to health care, education, employment, environment, and poverty (and so on) — this is quite remarkable.
As you might expect from this, healthy life expectancy (HLE) also correlates with levels of inactivity. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that HLE for males in the UK is just 62.8 years3 — less time than the Queen has been on the throne. Shockingly, only four towns have a HLE at birth for males of ≥70 years: Richmond upon Thames, Rutland, Wokingham, and, of course, Windsor. Notably, they all have activity levels of at least 68% and inactivity levels <21%.6...
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active — women, those with health conditions, and those in areas of deprivation. The community aspect of physical activity really matters to slower runners and walkers, who value the social connections they make. Events like parkrun can bring neighbourhoods together and act to create and then strengthen bonds between people; they are like community adhesive. Physical activity events can also impact directly at a practice level, increasing the resilience of GPs and their teams. Many parkrun practices have organised takeover days that create a social buzz and highlight the value they place on physical activity. Primary care teams can literally talk the talk and walk the walk. Volunteering at events can transform lives and has been shown to add a level of happiness and satisfaction even greater than participating in the physical activity itself. Social prescribing link workers have a key role in signposting to local physical activity groups.

The general public and healthcare professionals clearly understand the message about physical activity, even if they can’t remember the targets. Perhaps it would help to have a catchy slogan, but ‘moderate physical activity for 30 minutes, 5 times a week’ just won’t do. Maybe instead we should simply ask people to ‘move more, more often’.

REFERENCES