The last time I met a colleague, let’s call her M, she was sporting a limp and a walking stick. Her evidently painful injury had been sustained as a result of health-promoting exercise. Troubled by her injury M, with the authority of a scholar of public health, asked ‘What is an appropriate dose of exercise?’ It was a question I felt unable to answer.

While engaged in my morning micro-run, I realised that the answer was obvious: ‘Less than you’re doing right now, my friend!’ Given that M is an evidence-based girl, this answer probably would not suffice. So I am pleased to offer her a proper research paper to persuade her to run (and so perhaps hurt), less. Mads Rosenkilde and colleagues of the University of Copenhagen have published the results of a randomized controlled trial that recruited 61 sedentary and 61 sedentary and overweight men.

The men were divided into 3 groups: intense exercise (60 minutes 3 times per week), moderate exercise (30 minutes 3 times per week), or no change to their sedentary lifestyle. Not surprisingly nothing changed for the men who remained sedentary. The surprise result was that men doing moderate exercise lost more weight than those doing intense exercise.

M is neither a man, nor overweight, but perhaps the message that moderate exercise can be more beneficial than intense exercise could appeal nonetheless to a slim woman with a sore leg.

In the post-London Olympics glow, and the legacy mantra of inspiring a generation, there’s a danger that the exercise = health ideology will become increasingly immune to critical debate. There’s no doubt that there are a wide range of health benefits from exercising but there are also significant health costs. ‘Sport for all’ may mean ‘sports injuries for all’.
An olympic legacy for sports physiotherapists then?

Why is it that so many people – experts and laywomen/men alike – equate health benefits with the loss of weight? Exercise has many benefits, while weight-loss does not necessarily equate to an improvement of health per se. All this does is to re-produce the message that we all have to be slim to be healthy, and that weight loss is good for everybody – not a good message in our already appearance-obsessed society where people are being judged and discriminated against in terms of their health and personality, based on their body size.

YOUR COMMENTS

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