

## **The Importance of Walking in the Western Australian Physical Activity Strategy.**

**Ron Alexander**

### ***Abstract***

The Ministry of Sport and Recreation has physical activity as a core function. This presentation outlines why the Ministry believes Australians, in particular Western Australians need to be more active. It also presents walking is a major strategy in getting more people to be active and substantiates this initiative through sharing information on participation levels and patterns of Western Australia.

The Ministry has several walking initiatives, including the Trailswest and Walk Friendly programs that will be presented in some detail as examples of how to encourage people to be more physically active.

Finally, the presentation outlines the Ministry's efforts to be a partner in a major "whole of community" planning exercise aimed at developing an integrated and enhanced approach to physical activity in Western Australia. It is proposed to develop a Taskforce that lead this process aimed at increasing participation levels in Western Australia.

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Ron has a passionate interest in promoting physical activity, and has been instrumental in setting up the Taskforce into physical activity.

Ron also has a great interest in Australian Football. He has played for and captained East Fremantle, Fitzroy and East Perth teams, as well as gaining many coaching achievements, including the West Coast Eagles and the State team.

## **The Importance of Walking in the Western Australian Physical Activity Strategy**

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### ***Introduction***

*"One quarter of Australian children are obese because they mimic the sedentary lifestyle, poor eating habits and fad diets of their parents. They don't walk to school; they don't play sport in suburban streets or parks after school. The image of the fit young Aussie is under challenge from parental fear of lurking strangers. If we can't give our children the joys and adventures of childhood, we have all failed<sup>(7)</sup>."*

The above editorial comment eloquently illustrates a sad aspect of our modern lifestyle. What has been long suspected by mums and dads throughout Australia is now, unfortunately, backed up by an increasingly powerful body of evidence.

What are the reasons for the apparent decline? It's worth reflecting on these for a minute. The causal factors are complex, and range over a variety of personal, community and government interests. They include:

- changes to work practices, shift work and people working longer hours.
- greater reliance on motor cars.
- increasing urbanisation, with reduced play areas around the family home and street, and roads that become corridors of inactivity.
- changing family structures and family work practices which result in lower physical activity levels and opportunities through reduced sibling play and parental role modelling.
- increased use of technologies and media, such as television, home computers, internet, which lead to a reduction of incidental physical activity as well as providing powerful inactivity influences.
- complex changes within Education policy and the Education work force, resulting in reduced emphasis and time allocation to physical activity and sport within the school and in the school/community environment.
- an ageing population, raising new issues of independence and mobility.
- concerns for personal safety.

As a State Government Ministry, the major focus of the Ministry of Sport and Recreation is developing opportunities for increasing physical activity, to the benefit of individual lifestyle and community well-being. It is not just to do with Olympic Gold medals and organised sport, although these things are important in a well-balanced society, but has been increasingly focused on trying to move the inactives into a less sedentary lifestyle. To coin a phrase, "obesity is more than a cosmetic issue - it is a huge issue in public health".

The Ministry's emphasis has been reinforced recently through a statewide consultation process, resulting in the document, *Strategic Directions*<sup>(9)</sup>, which has set the direction

and tone of Ministry policy. This document identified six strategic focus areas and participation in physical activity was one of those priority areas. Participation includes all levels, all forms of activity and for all sectors of the community.

Walking is the single most critical physical activity of participation in Australia, and hence the Ministry is involved with initiatives that promote walking in a variety of environments. However, prior to going into detail about the pervasiveness of walking in Western Australia, I would like to comment on some of the costs and benefits of physical activity.

Health authorities have accepted the arguments about the benefits and burden of physical activity for a number of years and one of the first to do so in Australia was the National Heart Foundation, which introduced the Jump Rope for Heart program. The relationship between physical activity and health benefits has been furthered qualified in more recent years and the evidence is extremely clear in support of the need to do more activity. There is a clearly defined cost/benefit relationship between the cost of illness/disease and physical activity or inactivity.

The US Surgeon General<sup>(8)</sup>, more recently the Commonwealth Department of Aged Care and the Australian Sports Commission<sup>(6)</sup>, reported the following:

- Physical inactivity ranks second, after tobacco, in terms of contribution to ill-health in Australia
- There are powerful relationships between physical activity/inactivity and the following illnesses/diseases:
  - coronary heart disease.
  - stroke.
  - non-insulin dependent diabetes.
  - colorectal cancer.
  - breast cancer.
  - depression.
- The direct health care cost attributable to physical inactivity for the above six conditions is about \$377 million per year It is estimated that an increase of 1% in physical activity per year could reduce this health cost by approximately \$3.7m per year (1993/94 figures)<sup>(6)</sup>.

These estimates are only a start to identifying the full costs of physical inactivity. At present, we are not able to identify all of the indirect health costs associated with all illness and disease. Nor can we clearly and succinctly identify the benefits of increased physical activity through walking and/or cycling in relation to the Transport and Environmental portfolios, such as decreased motor vehicle usage and associated pollutants as more people cycle to work or use more public transport. In addition, the role of physical activity in crime prevention has on a number of occasions been documented and more recently outlined has been the focus of positive research by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>(3)</sup>.

The bottom line is that physical activity has numerous direct and indirect benefits to individuals, society, the environment and governments, and through walking as an activity, we are able to make a significant contribution to a changed environment.

Physical activity contributes to the building of social capital as the pursuit of active recreational outlets does much for community strength and vibrancy. Economic benefits

aside, it is this enhanced quality of life that makes physical activity worthy of attention by the Ministry, and by a host of other government and community agencies.

In 1999<sup>(5)</sup>, the Ministry collaborated with the University of Western Australia and the Department of Health to ascertain the participation levels of Western Australians. This information will be invaluable in supporting statewide initiatives aimed at increasing physical activity levels.

The research identified walking as the most popular of all physical activities, regardless of age, gender, location, education and employment group. However, before I explore the interest in walking, I would like to comment upon the national activity guidelines, in terms of their contribution to a health benefit.

Until fairly recently, it was thought that a large amount of vigorous physical activity was necessary to gain a health benefit. A lot of misplaced and unsuccessful effort was spent on trying to make inactive people do large amounts of vigorous activity that they often intensely dislike. It is now known that regular, moderate exercise can confer health benefits, without many the inherent risks of injury that at times may be the consequence of long term vigorous physical activity. These moderate intensity goals are achievable as personal and community targets, and have led to changes in the definition of national guidelines.

Now, with increasing sophistication, the recommended level of sufficient physical activity has been defined by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Welfare, and the Australian Sports Commission (Active Australia,) as 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity over five sessions per week<sup>(1)</sup>.

Based upon this background information, the Western Australian research consulted with over 3,000 people and asked them about their physical activity levels in November 1999. The full report is not available at the time of writing, however I am able to comment that there is a great deal of information on preferred facilities, motivation, barriers to participation, competing influences (such as television), preferred information sources, goal setting and planning and preferred social infrastructures. Each of these variables has an influence on an individual's willingness and commitment to physical activity and we are now able to analyse the data for Western Australia.

A more detailed outline of some of these variables as they relate to the development of physical activity strategies that the Ministry will be developing, will be presented at the Conference.

A few snippets from the research include

- walking is the most preferred form of active recreation. 60% of Western Australians (50% of men and 69% of women) walk for recreation and 25% walk for transport (25% men, 25% women)
- cycling and swimming are also very popular activities
- streets and footpaths are used for 52% of walking, with parks 12% and the beach 10%.

### ***Ministry Response***

The Ministry recognises that in order to bring about social change and a change in the behaviour of people, a multi faceted approach is needed. This involves a number of Government, local government and community agencies working together with the same focus and outcome. This more collaborative and integrated approach will better ensure social change, which in this instance is increased physical activity by all people. This is not an aspiration that an agency can achieve on their own.

In recent years, the Ministry has developed and assisted develop a number of strategies related to walking and these are a part of a larger physical activity plan.

The strategies include:

- The Trailswest program
- The Walk Friendly program
- Seniors Recreation Council
- The Statewide physical activity strategy.

### ***Trailswest***

Trailswest is a program designed to

- develop an overall plan for a state-wide network of trails
- establish an integrated link between State, LGA, local trails groups and the community
- develop a plan for co-ordination , development and promotion of recreation trails

The Trailswest concept is visionary in a number of respects.

First and foremost it is promoting and preserving for the future a network of trails for the purposes of conservation, recreation, education and tourism. At the same time, it is working to help the many local groups, most of them volunteers, who are dedicated to developing and maintaining trails for walking, cycling and horse-riding. Trailswest provides construction, safety and maintenance standards, as well as advice on safety, risk management and public liability

An Advisory Committee, comprising eight Government and community representatives, oversees the outcomes of the Trailswest program.

Trailswest is the reality of community and government working together to make things happen, to strengthen the community fabric and to provide a visionary heritage for our future.

### ***Walk Friendly***

The Ministry has been influenced by the work of Dr Billie Corti<sup>(4)</sup> and others who have emphasised the:

- importance of accessible and attractive environments where people feel safe to participate.
- importance of streetscapes in terms of safe and aesthetic environments.
- need for active promotion of activity and facility use in addition to provision the of facilities.

The work of Dr Corti was at the forefront of the Ministry's Walk Friendly program that was launched in 1999. Walk Friendly involves some 14 different government and community agencies, working together to promote walking. At its core is a 50-point checklist or audit that allows a community to assess the quality and quantity of its walking environments.

The key areas of the Walk Friendly process are:

- Access.
- Safety and security.
- Comfort; and
- Aesthetics.

The major partner in the audit process is local government, who is of course the key community provider of community facilities.

An example of the partnerships involved in Walk Friendly was a four-week walk promotion held in November and December 1999 in all Community Newspapers across Perth. This promotion reached a potential 750,000 people each week and was a joint initiative of Walk Friendly and Transport's Travelsmart initiative with support from Main Roads and the National Heart Foundation. The aim was to promote walking as a recreational pursuit, to increase physical activity or as an alternate means of transport.

### ***Seniors Recreation Council***

The Ministry was actively involved in the establishment of the Seniors Recreation Council during the 1990's. The intent of the Council is to empower seniors groups in the community to undertake planning and implementation of physical activity strategies and to date, this has been extremely successful. It is a fast growing, vibrant and energetic group, which receives funding from a number of different sources, including the Office of Seniors Interests.

### ***Statewide Strategy***

The Ministry has noted that physical activity, sport and recreation are being addressed in one form or another by at least 15 State Government agencies in Western Australia. While this is the core business of the Ministry, it is a means to an end for most other agencies. The Education Department, the Ministry of Justice and Family and Children Services, for example, are using different forms of physical activity to support initiatives aimed at school retention and performance, reductions in crime and anti social behaviour, family breakdowns and violence. Through physical activity, including walking, many social issues can be in part addressed and provide positive experiences for those who in the past have not had the privilege.

Transport and Environment also recognise that walking and cycling strategies are important to reducing air pollution, road costs and the consequences of road trauma.

The consequent of all these agencies working towards a common outcome is an opportunity to maximise gains in addressing physical inactivity. Where overlap occurs, this will be minimised as agencies work more closely together and share information and experiences. It is also acknowledged, that although physical activity is a common

strategy within government, there is no requirement to report on physical activity outcomes.

The Ministry has been concerned at the gap between the growing evidence of the costs of inactivity, the growing trend towards an inactive society and the responses by government agencies within Western Australia. With the support of a number of State Government and community groups, it has suggested to the Premier that a Statewide strategy should be developed by a Taskforce headed up by the Premier's Department, to prepare a comprehensive plan for physical activity in Western Australia. At the time of writing, Western Australia was in the process of establishing the Taskforce and the terms of reference.

The plan has called for an increase of 5% in the percentage of Western Australians being sufficiently physically active for health benefit by 2010. For walking alone, this would involve around an extra 100,000 people being more active in walking, to the point where it contributes significantly to their overall activity levels.

### ***Research***

Through the Taskforce process, we believe that there will be a need to pay increased attention to research, especially on state - specific matters.

One area we think needs attention is to develop a research package, which can be used by local communities to assess their own levels and patterns of activity. Because communities are best at designing their own community solutions to concepts such as physical activity, we believe that an important area of Government support would be to help with community physical activity planning processes, and measurement.

Another comment on research is about the research priorities in the broad area of public health. A recent article in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* (2) listed 17 unhealthy conditions in which physical inactivity increases the risk factors. The authors believe that as the human genome evolved within an environment of physical activity, that exercise research should be viewed from a non-traditional perspective. In this perspective, the 'Control' group should be taken from a physically active population and not from a sedentary population with its predisposition to modern chronic diseases!! If this view were accepted, then it would turn much thinking on its ear, and confirm the critical nature of the problem of physical inactivity.

### ***Conclusion***

The Ministry of Sport and Recreation is a major stakeholder in the move to arrest physical inactivity levels. It recognises that walking is a key strategy in this move, partly because it is the basic form of human mobility and partly because of its inherent accessibility and popularity to all age groups in almost any setting.

Ironically, the recent acceptance of the role of walking in reducing motor vehicle usage has seen it gain new advocates and supporters, and is further helping a fundamental change to transport and urban design and planning.

From the Ministry's perspective, we see an emerging interest by many government agencies in the issue of physical activity. This trend is very positive, and will require us

to focus on integrated and coordinated outcomes. We call on agencies to work together to forge this integration, and to work together to help communities be responsible and plan for their physical activity outcomes.

I do not want to under-estimate the critical importance of the issue of declining physical activity to our community. It is a big issue, and one that is becoming increasingly in the public domain.

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