

ACTION ON PUBLIC HEALTH Roger Crofts

A fundamental change has occurred with medics placing emphasis on what individuals can do out of doors. A poster in the Edinburgh Cancer Centre exhorts patients to **sit less and move more** suggesting physical activity helps to manage tiredness and fatigue, and reduces stress and anxiety. There is clear evidence that green infrastructure benefits peoples health and wellbeing, and is a means to that end.

First why do we need green infrastructure?

People are disassociated from their surroundings. They are faced with neglected wasteland and have no link with nature. Those living in areas of highest deprivation are worst affected. We should help them to have better life styles and life chances.

People are given the wrong medication. Traditional medication is dispensed at a high cost - analgesics cost £13m per year. Medical services focus on specific ailments, not on the whole person. Surely the better 'pill' is outdoor experience and activity. Medical and other professionals are not working together effectively to find solutions for the whole person or family or locality.

Environmental mismanagement in and around our towns and cities. Planners claim to plan with greenspace in mind and National Planning Framework 3 has a strategic objective of green infrastructure. But, planning is too focussed on providing land for houses and development. The South East Scotland Plan, for example, fails to refer to environmental quality in house building or to link quality of the environment with reducing social deprivation.

Second, what can we learn from evidence and activity elsewhere?

Physical inactivity is major health risk according to the World Health Organisation: thirty minutes a day of physical activity makes a substantial difference to individual health.

Work for the Scottish Activity Research Collaboration shows that physical inactivity in primary and secondary care sectors is £94m, equivalent to £18 per person per year. Surveys show that outdoor activity physically reduces factors contributing to cardiovascular disease, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes and hypertension, and mentally improves self-esteem, alleviating anxiety, and increasing self-awareness.

A recent review on links between human health and outdoor experience showed that:

- Access to safe and high quality green space benefits individuals across every stage of their lifespan and enhances their physical, mental, social and spiritual health and wellbeing.
- In urban areas, parks foster social connections that are vital to community cohesion and contribute to social wellbeing.

The Scottish Physical Activity Task Force estimated that if physical inactivity in Scotland decreased by 1% each year for the next five years, the benefit from the life years saved is estimated at £85.2 million.

The research-based evidence and a growing divergence between urban populations and natural parks persuaded Parks Victoria, Australia to develop 'healthy parks healthy people' to entice people to visit and enjoy space protected for nature. A decade on, it is an international movement.

What lessons can we learn? New partnerships are required between education, medicine, urban planning, outdoor recreation and nature. Remember that health and environmental benefits can go hand in hand, particularly improvements in ecosystem services and people's well-being. And, remember to join in as partners with international bodies in the ground breaking Healthy Parks Healthy People programme to share knowledge, exchange ideas and learn about good practice.

Third, what action is needed in Scotland?

There is a lot going on, but medical professionals are not sufficiently engaged and the planners are not delivering integrated, multi-objective planning. I propose a 4-point plan with the overall objective of achieving greater physical and mental wellbeing of people and improved local environments for them to use actively.

1. The whole nation activity plan

Let's have a real action programme of healthy people healthy outdoor activities throughout Scotland, in every health board area, every primary care group and every GP surgery in a partnership with outdoor activity experts and providers. The Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform is taking a lead but her colleagues and others must join her.

2. Automatic prescription of the 'outdoor pill'

Rather than prescribing complex drug treatments, medics should prescribe outdoor activity in association with local providers, alongside their mainstream medical support. This will require training of primary care medics, GPs and pharmacists in the offering of alternative therapies involving outdoor activity.

3. Deliver special programmes for target groups and places

Two targets are essential: those with the poorest health and school children due to obesity and influencing the behaviour of family members. School teachers and parents associations should be actively encouraged to lead on these programmes.

4. Make the urban land use planning system fully integrated and multi-purpose

The known benefits of a green, clean and friendly environment should be always part of the planning, building and operation of new hospitals and local health and care centres. It should be part of *sustainable towns and cities*.