

Ron Wilson, MD

The Olympics and physical activity— How can our patients benefit?

Traditionally, the Olympics lead to an increased emphasis on sport and elite athletes' quest to "own the podium." We only need to see the demand for tickets to our own 2010 Winter Olympic events and the buzz associated with the opening of the Richmond Olympic Skating Oval to see evidence of our fascination with high performance athletes and their achievements. However, do the Olympics and the athletes' achievements rub off on us? Do they inspire us to become more physically active for the resulting health benefits? Is there evidence that hosting the Olympics will lead to increased health benefits for all?

Premier Gordon Campbell has stated that he wants BC to be the healthiest population to ever host the Olympic and Paralympic Games. He set five goals for British Columbians to strive toward and created ActNow BC to promote and assist in reaching these goals. One of the goals is to increase physical activity levels by 20% (other goals can be accessed on the ActNow BC web site).

Is there any evidence that physical activity levels have increased in conjunction with previous Olympic Games? In fact, relatively little research has been done to study the "trickle-down" effect of staging an Olympic Games. Population-level data collected after the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games revealed no impact on participation in sport-related activities. Population-wide surveys on physical activity levels conducted in conjunction with the Sydney Olympics found little change in citizens' activity levels from pre- to post-event. In fact, physical activity levels actually were lower in 2000 in Australia than in 1999 and 1997, the years leading up to the Olympics. Success by a country hosting the Olympics may have an impact on people already active in a sport that does well, but activity levels overall do not increase.

There are clearly many conflicting views about whether hosting the Olympics is a beneficial undertaking, considering the large amount of money that is spent for a relatively small number of elite athletes and all the time and energy that goes into producing the Games. Hosting the Games can lead to improvements in infrastructure (such as the makeover of the Sea-to-Sky Highway) and legacies of the Games (such as the Richmond Oval and other new venues) that will continue to be used long after the Games are finished. The boost to our economy during the Games is no doubt helpful, and perhaps even some headway will be made on housing and other social issues facing us. I do not wish to argue these points here but rather pose the question, can we play a role in using the Games to help improve physical activity levels and thereby the health of British Columbians?

Much is happening already that we can participate in and build on. The Walk BC program allows us, as physicians, to help our inactive patients become more active by recommending a walking regimen and providing them with a patient walking kit that includes a pedometer, a pedometer tracking sheet, and a list of community resources. In fact, almost every jurisdiction in BC has an Active Community designation, through which groups of active people seek to promote physical activity in their communities through various initiatives. These groups are happy to work with you or your patients directly to help them become more active.

The Athletics and Recreation Committee is actively looking at ways to promote physical activity in association with the Olympics. Ideas are emerging and all of them will be considered. One possibility is to adopt an athlete by providing support and having him or her be a spokesperson promoting physical activity in a particular community. Another idea is to encourage communities to participate in the Walk to Whistler program, an initiative created in Fort St. John where all BC communities can log their steps using pedometers and walk their way to Whistler, a key site of the 2010 Olympic Games. Finally, Move for Health Day is an annual event held each 10 May and originated by the World Health Organization to promote physical activity and its importance for health. Physicians can work within their communities to support events on this important day.

I am sure there are many, many ways we can use the Olympics as a catalyst to promote physical activity for its health benefits. So let's take this opportunity to get more physically active ourselves and promote increased physical activity for our patients and communities. We can make a difference and help to improve our patients' health with this one easy prescription.

—Ron Wilson, MD
Chair, Athletics and Recreation Committee

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