Physical Activity and Public Health Practice: A New Feature of *JPAH*

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It has been more than a decade since the Surgeon General of the United States issued the startling message that moderate physical activity in modest amounts could produce monumental benefits. What an incredible gift to the world to reveal that something as simple and enjoyable as taking a walk with a friend can impart significant health benefits—in both the physical- and the mental-health domains. The take-home message was that almost everyone can reduce risk for crippling, debilitating chronic illness.

**Irony.** So why is it that the prevalence of sedentary behavior has not taken a huge dive in the past 10 years? I believe that the answer lies in a bitter irony: At the same time scientists are accumulating more and more information on the dazzling health benefits of physical activity, relentless changes in the world around us make it more and more difficult for everyone to be physically active. The epidemic of obesity and chronic disease all around the globe can be seen as a normal and natural response to changes in our physical and social environments that negatively affect access to physical activity—changes such as:

- elimination of the need for physical activity as part of employment for most people,
- increased time spent behind the wheel of a car, up to an average of 87 minutes per day in 2005,\(^1,2\)
- reduction in safe places for children and adults to be physically active because of urban sprawl, and
- increases in “screen time” (time spent on television, computer use, and video games).

**No Bad Guys.** The changes in our environment that limit physical activity are not the work of evildoers with a mission to ruin our lives. There are usually very good reasons for each change; the effect on physical activity is incidental. For example, one city in Michigan recently began construction of a new high school to replace the old one that was simply not large enough. The city fathers and mothers did what their peers all over the country are doing: They found a large tract of land at a reasonable price on the outskirts of town and started building.

Sadly, the school decision-makers did not figure into their price calculations one very meaningful factor; they did not calculate the cost that will accrue because the new school site precludes walking or biking to school. How does one put a price tag on the loss of 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity from daily life for nearly...
every teen in the community over the next 50 years? Every one of those students will be nudged a little further toward obesity and chronic disease.

**Small Decisions Add Up.** Every week that goes by, another school is built in a location that rules out walking or biking. Every year, scores of decisions that discourage physical activity are made in every community, but few of them are understood in that light by the conscientious public servants who are making these decisions:

- Should we add 2 new lanes to this road or use the same space for 1 left-turn lane and 2 bike lanes?
- Should we zone this area for residential use only, or should we allow some retail establishments that residents could reach by foot?
- Should we approve this builder’s proposal for a subdivision on the outskirts of town, or can we offer incentives to build similar homes in an abandoned commercial site inside the city limits?
- Should we drop recess to give more instructional time for math and English?

**Leisure-Time Demands.** Few of such decisions have a huge effect on physical activity, but the cumulative result of scores of them, decided the “wrong” way, is great erosion of physical activity as part of normal daily living. Eliminating physical activity from “normal daily living” and shoving it into “leisure time” creates a no-win situation for the vast majority of us for whom leisure time is more of a dream than a reality.

The forces acting against physical activity in our culture are so pervasive and so universal that they threaten to marginalize the value of the excellent research on physical activity and health that is reported in this journal. What good does it do for us to know, for example, the health effect of a given level of exertion if so few of our citizens are able to carve out time from their leisure minutes to give that level of exertion a whirl?

**New Feature of JPAH.** The good news is that there are creative people all over the country who are taking steps to stem the tide of change that is pushing us all toward sedentary behavior. To recognize and support their efforts, the editors of *JPAH* have decided to broaden the scope of the journal. Starting with this issue, there will be a new section titled Public Health Practice. We understand that few communities, at this point in the process of trend reversal, will be able to demonstrate the increases in physical activity that they are working toward. Nevertheless, we feel it is important to create a forum for sharing strategies for increasing physical activity, with emphasis on policy changes, environmental changes, and programs that make it easier for people to be active.

**Invitation to Submit Public Health Practice Manuscripts.** We invite our colleagues from the worlds of public health, academia, and government to share stories of their efforts—both successes and challenges. We hope that this new forum will provide recognition to the pioneers who are taking difficult first steps. We also hope that the opportunity to share stories will encourage collaborations between the public health and academic communities. Instructions for contributors to this new section are available at the *JPAH* Web site, which is located at