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### *Prophylactic role of physical activity*

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#### **Profilaktyczne znaczenie aktywności ruchowej**

*If you do not run when you're well,  
you will run when you're ill*

*Horace*

#### **HEALTH AS THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN VALUE**

Human life is filled with striving, wishing, expecting, dreaming ...; through renewing our existence, we try to realize our visions. They are the values around which the history of human existence is woven. "The values appear as something the subject wants, desires, something he or she – now or later – wants to add to his/her existence, be with, achieve and absorb, thus enriching his/her internal world and transcendent abilities against the world."<sup>1</sup> Man, behaving knowingly and intentionally, tries to achieve a certain level of good by means of feeling the specific values, which are significant to him. "The idea of humanity says that man is the existence facing the values and in some measure "doomed" to realize it – if there is a real need to be human."<sup>2</sup> However, the space containing human values is not homogenous, and does not have the general and unequivocal mandatory character. The known values – depending on individual preferences – are ranked into a specific hierarchy. The demand for realization is related to the level of significance, ascribed to a given value. It is also important whether the accepted values are exclusively declarative or whether they are realized – at least to a limited extent.

People usually want to be happy; however, the notion of happiness is very large and difficult to define, as it is dependent on a number of subjective factors. Nevertheless, quite safely, we may assume that one of the most frequent human wishes is to be healthy. Wishing health to ourselves and others is the most common greeting. We may say then that the value of preserving and enriching health is accepted as one of the cardinal values – it determines significantly the length and quality of earthly life.

#### **HEALTH – THE VALUE THAT IS GIVEN AND UNDERESTIMATED**

When is a person healthy? Without going into details, we may assume that from the subjective viewpoint, a relatively healthy individual is someone accepting a certain level of his/her illnesses or someone without the knowledge of his/her illness. Those who have a feeling of being ill, usually "begin to cure themselves", trying in different ways to re-establish the homeostasis. People who are satisfied with their health status often do not do anything to preserve it, even less to improve it. Not infrequently, believing that "there is health, because it must be" they lead their life in extreme disregard of their health; however, frequently "wishes of good health" are accompanied by raising glasses full of alcohol and drinking excessively other harmful beverages – coffee, tea, or even drugs. It may be easily noticed that in many cases the declared and expected values are in conflict with the actually realized values; in many cases the lifestyle is simply destructive for people. In reality it appears frequently that the hierarchy of realized values is different from the structure of accepted and declared values; some harmful values "demand" to be realized more strongly than the constructive ones.

## **AMBIVALENCE OF PROHEALTHY EXPECTATIONS**

We want very much to be healthy. We are happy when we are in good health, and illness is a major discomfort. One could think that actions to preserve or even improve one's health should be fundamental to people. The value of good health is undoubtedly well accepted, but somehow "transparent" in everyday life. We are satisfied with being relatively healthy and we abuse health, forgetting that it is not constant and everlasting. Usually there is a certain "excess" of health, so subconsciously we accept the fact that health deficiencies resulting from a given lifestyle are not so dangerous to us. A paradox emerges: wishing to live a long and healthy life, we undertake unhealthy actions, decreasing or even destructing our health potential. Only in crisis we notice the fragility of health, referring to doctors for help and expecting radical improvement; forgetting that it is easier to prevent than to cure. Why then is man so "smart", that he does not value prophylaxis more than risk of health loss? The answer seems to be hidden in the interrelations between various components giving value to human existence; health is very high in the ladder of values, however people assume its relatively stable presence. Moreover, a lot of values realized in disregard or even against health seem to be more attractive than health itself. Regular striving for good health is associated with certain limitations, which frequently leads to failure of prophylaxis. It is much easier to apply a "magic cure" than stick to dietary restrictions; it is easier to stimulate electrically one's muscles than to perform regular physical exercises; it is easier to take a sleeping pill or a stimulant than to lead a regular, healthy life. So, if we want to promote healthy lifestyle, we should concentrate on issues related to competitiveness of proposed solutions as compared with others advertised as simpler and more effective health values. Today, people frequently with consumer attitudes, want to multiply and maximize their effects in order to achieve a lot at small cost. They want to live well and agreeably, often placing too much trust in medicine and its ability "to cure almost all diseases". Health promotion should then focus on striving for health as a real value of high importance whose realization may bring a lot of satisfaction and hedonistic experiences.

## **HEALTH PROPHYLAXIS AS A SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL VALUE**

Human life can be divided into two basic areas: working time and leisure time. Health prophylaxis and promotion should be considered in these two areas. Being at work, we face significant limitations in healthy attitudes, which is largely determined by the type of work; at leisure we have more possibilities to undertake voluntarily prohealthy actions. What we do at leisure corresponds to how we understand and realize the hierarchy of values and affects the quality of life, also at work. It seems that promotion of healthy attitudes and health education will be effective only when it is reasonably attractive to realize health values, even to make sacrifices for the sake of one's health.

The social need to organize health prophylaxis and promotion actions was formulated in the National Health Programme for 1996-2005. The strategic goal is to improve health status and quality of life. The resultant operational goals are systemic and require national efforts, but some of them are modifiable through individual attempts to build a life that respect vital values. Self-education with respect to improved physical activity, diet, limitation or elimination of smoking, limitation of alcohol consumption and modification of the culture of drinking and restricted use of psychoactive substances may in a short time and effectively lead to the improvement of individual and social indices of the quality of life.

## **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN HEALTH PROMOTION**

Active and conscious participation in physical activity (physical activity refers here to ,... a specific attitude towards someone's body, conscious and active concern for someone's development, fitness and health, an ability to organize and spend someone's time in the way which is beneficial to physical and mental health"4) is of basic importance to normal human development and his/her participation in social life. Rapid social development facilitates our work, education and everyday life thus increasing free time. On the other hand, it reduces our capacity, immunity and physical activity, which may lead to the development of social diseases: atherosclerosis, coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, obesity and postural defects. Despite the high risk, the society seems not to be interested in active recreation. "While a hundred years ago, over 90% of energy expenditure was

related to muscle work, today in highly developed countries, it does not exceed 1%.”<sup>3</sup> The accumulated energy excess may be a source of stress and increasingly frequent aggressive behavior of young people. Not infrequent ways of venting feelings such as drinking, smoking, consumption of psychotropic agents and drugs should be avoided at all costs. TV watching or computer playing should also be restricted. It is imperative to build social awareness in which it is natural and important for each human being, from childhood to advanced age, to perform physical activity. Correct self-assessment, awareness of one’s mental and physical status allows for the formation of a skillful, prohealthy day schedule and energy expenditure. Various forms of activity may include listening to music, reading, watching a good programme or going to the theatre or cinema. These forms, however should not replace the most effective way of excess energy expenditure and regeneration of vital forces, i.e. physical activity. “Increasing physical activity is regarded as the most profitable activity in the field of public health /.../”<sup>6</sup> A reasonable schedule and everyday habits are of major importance to people today. We should have time not only for hygiene, education, meals or sleep, but also for physical exercises, going out and physical recreation in its broad sense. Physical activity results in structural and functional changes in the body. Some of them are seen with a naked eye: muscle build-up, better posture, firm movements, better work tolerance, improved mood and improved motor features: strength, velocity, endurance and agility. Physical activity affects also the function of many organs.

Physical activity contributes also to the development of social and educational features, for instance the ability to overcome difficulties, assess chances and risks, courage, respect, competition, strong will, endurance, discipline, intelligence, anticipation. Active contribution to physical culture also increases work effectiveness, resistance to physical and mental fatigue and general immunity. This brief outline of body changes resulting from physical exercises confirms the role of physical activity in the prevention of social diseases, especially cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Lack of physical activity is a risk factor for coronary heart disease and hypertension. “Proper physical activity, smoking cessation, and proper diet cannot be replaced with any pill, “a spring in the heart” or “laser holes””.<sup>5</sup> Concern for someone’s health is one of the necessary conditions to experience a healthy, long and happy life – to individual and social advantage.

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## ABSTRACT

Human life is filled with striving, wishing, expecting, dreaming ...; through renewing our existence, we try to realize our visions. Actions to preserve or even improve one's health should be fundamental to people. We are satisfied with being relatively healthy and we abuse health, forgetting that it is not constant and everlasting. Only in crisis we notice the fragility of health. It seems that promotion of healthy attitudes and health education will be effective only when it is reasonably attractive to realize health values, even to make sacrifices for the sake of one's health. Concern for someone's health is one of the necessary conditions to experience a healthy, long and happy life – to individual and social advantage.

## STRESZCZENIE

Życie człowieka wypełnione jest dążeniami, pragnieniami, oczekiwaniami, marzeniami...; aktualizując swój byt próbujemy realizować owe wyobrażenia. Podejmowanie działań sprzyjających podtrzymaniu, a nawet pomnożeniu zdrowia powinno stanowić jedno z fundamentalnych dążeń człowieka. Kontentujemy się względnym zdrowiem i eksploatujemy je zapominając, że nie jest ono dobrem trwałym i nienaruszalnym. Dopiero w momentach kryzysowych dostrzegamy jego kruchość. Wydaje się, że promowanie zdrowego stylu życia i kształtowanie postaw sprzyjających zdrowiu będzie skuteczne tylko wówczas, gdy przeżywanie wartości z tym związanych stanie się dla człowieka wystarczająco atrakcyjne i posiadać będzie odpowiednią „siłę przyciągania”; tak odczuwane wartości i potrzeby będą „domagać się” realizacji, zwiększając chęć do podejmowania działań na rzecz własnego zdrowia. Dbalność o własne zdrowie jest jednym z niezbędnych warunków, by człowiek mógł doświadczać – ku pożytkowi indywidualnemu i społecznemu – życia możliwie zdrowego, długiego i szczęśliwego.