

Living Well: A summary of the University of Winchester and Southern Policy Centre Seminar

As we heard at the first University of Winchester and Southern Policy Centre health and social care seminar in March 2018, one challenge for our society is ensuring people can enjoy a healthy and fulfilling old age. Lord Geoffrey Filkin from the Centre for Ageing Better told us how important “living well”, paying attention to our overall physical and mental wellbeing, is in shaping a better later life.

Our second seminar, held on 14 March 2019 explored the idea of wellbeing, asking what “living well” might mean. We heard from experts in diet, physical activity and mental well-being. Following their presentations we had a lively question and answer session, expertly Chaired by Alan Titchmarsh, the University’s Chancellor and outdoor enthusiast. This note summarises the evening, which was generously supported by Energise Me and Paris Smith.

Diet

Professor Shireen Kassam, Consultant Haematologist at Kings College Hospital, opened the evening by speaking about the importance of diet and eating well. Professor Kassam explained the link between chronic disease and our lifestyle choices. She showed that 11% of deaths in the UK are premature, and many of those are preventable through healthy lifestyle choices

Research Professor Kassam drew attention to has demonstrated that diets which are particularly high in dairy, red meats and processed foods can result in more illness and a reduced expectation of a healthy life. However, the challenge people faced was that messages on diet were often confusing, sometimes contradictory.

There is also clear evidence of the benefits of a plant-based diet. There is a direct relationship between fruit and vegetable intake and a reduced risk of mortality from all causes. Our speaker gave examples of how such diets can arrest and even reverse the risk of illness, including heart disease and cancer. People who adjusted their lifestyles to change their diet, as well as addressing smoking, alcohol consumption and a lack of exercise, saw real improvements in their health and wellbeing.

Our dietary choices also have wider implications for the wellbeing of our planet. How we produce food and the nature of that food has significant impacts on CO₂ emissions, and so our global climate. It can also give rise to social and economic inequality. Once again, a plant-based diet can help manage these impacts.

Physical Activity

Our second speaker was Dr William Bird MBE, a GP and founder of 'Intelligent Health', who spoke about the importance of physical activity. At the root of the problem, he suggested, was our evolutionary history: our bodies were designed for a very different lifestyle from the sedentary, indoor way we live today, disconnected from nature and our environment.

Most of us recognise the link between inactivity and conditions such as obesity, but Dr Bird explained that our modern environment can cause mental as well as physical stresses, which, taken together, increase levels of what he termed "chronic inflammation". This lies at the root of many of the acute conditions so prevalent today. Like Professor Kassam, he drew attention to the wider consequences of inactivity, showing how it could hamper an individual's ability to learn, or a community's economic prosperity.

Dr Bird went on to explain the physiological mechanism behind the relationship between inactivity and poor levels of wellbeing. The mitochondria in our body cells provide energy which, if not used to keep our bodies active, could cause damage leading to earlier cell death, and so physical decline.

Whilst all exercise is beneficial for our wellbeing, there is clear evidence that exercising outdoors, "in nature" as Dr Bird put it, is better than going to the gym. There is, for example, persuasive evidence to show that people who volunteer to do conservation work experience real improvements in their wellbeing, in part a consequence of the wider social and community benefit their actions offer.

Mental Health

Finally, Kevin Gardner, Chief Executive of Solent Mind, and his colleague Abby Oakley spoke about our mental wellbeing. Kevin explained how 1 in 4 adults will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. These problems would often be linked to other aspects of their lifestyle such as poor housing or poor economic prospects, meaning that effective treatment could not be confined to medical intervention.

The growing awareness of the mental health challenges our society faces is welcome, as is the priority given to mental health in the NHS Long Term Plan. However, mental health is not widely understood and those with poor mental health are often marginalised and stigmatised.

Kevin went on to outline how Solent Mind took an holistic approach to mental wellbeing. Their wellbeing centres provided support across all elements of people's lifestyles. For example, they encouraged clients to be active, outdoors in the natural environment, which is as important to improving mental wellbeing as more traditional medical interventions.

Abby told a very powerful story of her own "lived experience" of the mental health challenges she faced as a teenager and young woman. She also encouraged us to take "joined-up" perspective, giving as much weight to physical or social activity as direct support. Most importantly, she suggested, our society must talk openly about

the importance of good mental wellbeing and how society can support those facing problems.

Discussion and Conclusions

In questions our audience raised a variety of issues, from the benefits to businesses of focusing on wellbeing in the workplace to the limitations of our “medical model” for treating physical and mental health through diagnosis and drugs.

There are perhaps four key messages which emerge from what all present found a very enlightening and thought provoking evening:

- Wellbeing depends on a comprehensive examination of all aspects of lifestyles, from diet to physical activity, as well as our social and economic lives. These cannot be compartmentalised, we must look at the whole person;
- Our medical model for treating physical or mental health cannot succeed if it takes too narrow an approach to solutions. Social prescribing – what one speaker called “community solutions” – is just as important as medical treatment;
- Public bodies – the NHS, local authorities – should explore how we can make simple changes to policies and practices to “nudge” people to change their behaviour and adopt lifestyles which improve all aspects of their wellbeing. Our approach should encourage and incentivise change and not be punitive;
- We need to encourage a wider public conversation on wellbeing, promoting a better understanding of how to take a joined-up approach to improving our lifestyles.

Useful links

Public Health England’s Eatwell Guide, which can be found at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/528193/Eatwell_guide_colour.pdf

The Chief Medical Officer’s can be found at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-getting-every-adult-active-every-day/health-matters-getting-every-adult-active-every-day>

Infographics explaining physical activity needs for people of all ages and abilities can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/start-active-stay-active-infographics-on-physical-activity>