If jogging is a joke, who should have the last laugh?

It was the end of my sabbatical in Canada, and I was strolling around Stanley Park, one of the many jewels of Vancouver British Columbia. I was just finishing a four month trip in Australia and Canada studying educational methods used to teach general practitioners. OK I’ll come clean—I was having an “extended holiday with a purpose”. On this beautiful autuminal Sunday, the air was crisp and, as the sun sparkled on Burrard Inlet, the colours of the spruce, maple, and arbutus painted the lower slopes of the snow clad peaks across the bay. “No wonder this is one of the most popular places to live in our world” I thought.

Despite this idyll most of the people I saw that day looked ill at ease, in pain even. Why? I hear you ask. The answer is obvious: they were jogging! Why is an activity that looks ill at ease, in pain even. Why? The literature is full of the hazards of urban jogging,14 although I doubt many joggers have this in mind as they don’t their trainers. And then there is joggers nipple, but we won’t dwell on that!

Now you may have formed the impression that I don’t jog, and you would be mostly right. I’m certainly not a habitual jogger, although I do dabble occasionally. I still feel that man is essentially a Stone Age animal living in the modern world. For the life of me, I can’t imagine Stone Age man jogging. Running like hell to escape a snack-seeking carnivore: yes. Jogging: I just can’t see it. It seems so unnatural.

So how do I feel about my jogging compatriots? I still have this deeply British admiration for the “no pain, no gain” philosophy. Mostly I hope the joggers do enjoy running (but I do wish they’d smile). I will continue to extol the virtues of the healthy lifestyle to my patients, and I’m sure exercise is in there somewhere. However, I’m not convinced that the joggers will need my services any less than my “normal” patients—whoever they are!

Now—anyone fancy a nice walk?

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Encouraging stair walking

A motivational poster placed at a choice point between escalator and stair use, in a city centre underground station, doubled stair use (fig 1). The study also showed that men and boys used the stairs more than women and girls both before and after the poster intervention, but there was no obvious explanation of this finding. Follow up interviews with 200 stair users or escalator users showed that motivational posters can change the behaviour of people who are not very active as not all those using the stairs were regularly active. The barriers to stair use were time, laziness, and effort, while the motivations for stair use were saving time and improving health. Women cited laziness as the key barrier to stair climbing and in comparison with men perceived stair climbing as requiring more effort.

The study results led to the design and distribution of stair walking promotional posters throughout Scottish workplaces by the Health Education Board for Scotland. Within Glasgow a new promotional campaign was developed using life size cut out cartoon characters placed at the foot of escalators, as posters on platforms, and as advertising cards on trains (fig 2). These materials encouraged stair use and had straplines explaining the health benefits of small amounts of physical activity. The campaign has run for two 12-week periods in all Glasgow underground venues. Several other studies have shown the efficacy of motivational signs promoting stair use.

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Figure 1 Motivational poster placed between stairs and escalators.

Figure 2 Promotional campaign. Reproduced with permission of the Greater Glasgow Health Board.