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Looking into the next 20 years

THE WELLNESS INSTITUTE CONTINUES TO IMPACT MANY LIVES IN WINNIPEG

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Gord Saydak enrolled at The Wellness Institute programs 20 years ago to change his lifestyle.

Once upon a time, a Seven Oaks General Hospital doctor dreamed of making Winnipeg a place free of chronic disease.

He dreamed he'd build a haven where disease could be prevented and managed.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

The Wellness Institute is working on expanding its facility to accommodate the growing number of members.



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Member Wanda Allen lifts weights at The Wellness Institute's gym.

Today, that place is called The Wellness Institute, and it's 20 years old this year.

Dr. Kevin Saunders has practised family medicine in northwest Winnipeg for almost 30 years. He was a leader in founding The Wellness Institute and today works as its medical director.

His goal in helping found the institute was preventing patients from coming back to Seven Oaks General Hospital with the same health issues right after being discharged.

For 20 years, The Wellness Institute has been helping many people prevent heart attacks, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.

In addition to its exercising program, the facility offers a full-service rehabilitation clinic that features physiotherapy, athletic physiotherapy, return-to-work programs, diabetes counselling, and psychology services.

"We saw in our community growing rates of lifestyle-related diseases...People are getting ill, they are coming to our emergency department, they are being admitted, and we discharge them, and often come back," said Casie Nishi, executive director of The Wellness Institute, talking about the realization that preventative care was needed in the area.

"Seeing this cycle in our community and the impact on hospital operations, our hospital was very visionary, again more than 20 years ago, and (we) said 'As a hospital, we can do more than just wait for people to become ill and treat them when they are sick and then discharge them.'"

When the facility opened in 1996, it provided support for physical activity, quitting smoking, healthy dieting and weight loss.

While The Wellness Institute is attached to Seven Oaks General Hospital, it is a self-supporting department of the hospital. It has been able to run its programs, some for free, thanks to community support, membership and services fees, and donations.

Having the institute attached to the hospital was a matter of convenience. Staff members can work in close collaboration with medical teams. Doctors who think patients could benefit from exercising to manage diabetes, blood pressure, and cholesterol, can quickly direct them to the institute.

That was the case with the institute's 63rd member, Gord Saydak.

Saydak was in his 50s and had found out he was overweight and had high blood pressure. He met with Saunders, who told him it was time to change his lifestyle — it was time to become healthier.

"I had to do something or else I would've probably had a massive heart attack or a massive stroke," he said.

Saydak went from not being active to walking 35 laps a day, cycling, lifting weights, and having more energy to enjoy life. He added people are "trying to stay alive longer."

Saydak said the Wellness Institute raises awareness in the communities it serves of the importance of being active and healthy, and how that can prevent serious illness.

"Who wants to pass away? If you can make it a couple of years out of it, then why not? You spend more time with your family, with your grandkids," he said. "You can do more things instead of just looking out your window because you can't move."

Saydak has seen himself and many members evolve in the last 20 years. He talked about a woman who started walking on the track with a walker a while ago. Today she uses only a cane.

Saydak is no longer high-risk, and he attributes that to the healthy lifestyle he has embraced.

Research to improve healthy living

The institute puts a lot of efforts into healthy aging and chronic disease management research. It conducts and contributes to research projects to improve its services and spread information. One of its ongoing research projects is The Manitoba Personalized Lifestyle Research (TMPLR) program, the goal of which is to reduce the severity of chronic diseases in the province by supporting people with a change of lifestyle — developing personalized diets, exercise plans and sleep recommendations.

Nishi said the institute is aware of how lifestyles are changing, with people becoming increasingly busy. For this reason, it has been working extensively in encouraging people to take care of their well-being.

"(Our programs have) got to be evidence-based. It's got to be a place that it's not another gym; it's not another place for fit people to work out. It's a place that addresses this gap. So people who never exercised before have a safe place to come," she added.

Since its opening, The Wellness Institute has become a renowned facility and has received many awards for its efforts in prevention, recovery and rehabilitation.

Most recently, the institute won the 2016 Nu Step Silver Pinnacle award for its comprehensive approach in supporting seniors to exercise and be well.

The institute's goal is to continue to be a leader in chronic disease prevention and management, which means adopting some of the newest techniques and technologies. It is working on different programs and apps that provide instant reward and gratification. One example is a digital tool that will track what people eat.

"Research has shown that tracking what you eat helps with weight loss ," Nishi said.

Celebrating the future

Staff at the institute estimate that its programs have prevented more than 8,000 heart attacks, helped 8,450 people manage diabetes, educated 48,000 members about their health and introduced 4,500 children to active living.

"We are not only looking back on the impact of those years but looking forward to the possibilities the next 20 hold," Nishi said.

Many members come from nearby communities including the Maples, Garden City, Inkster, West Kildonan, East St. Paul, West St. Paul and River East. The institute's cardiac rehab and pulmonary rehab programs receive patients from all over the city.

One of the institute's goals for the next 20 years is to grow with its surrounding community. Currently, it is undergoing some renovations. Its pool is being refurbished and will re-open in a few weeks. In addition to that, the women's and men's steam rooms have been revamped, along with the whirlpool. More parking stalls have been added, too — marking the second parking expansion since the institute opened.

When the Wellness Institute first opened, it had 400 members. The recent expansion is part of an effort to accommodate the 6,500 members who currently attend programs.

"The Wellness Institute has become a healthy social hub in the community where you'll find people of all ages and abilities," Coun. Devi Sharma (Old Kildonan), who has provided funds for the pool renovations, said.

"I see older adults exercising together and forming social connections which have a big impact on health and wellness."

Membership at Wellness

The Wellness Institute keeps its membership rates affordable.

- Individual memberships are \$50.75 per month with full access to the facility and its programs during regular business hours (Monday to Thursday from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m., Fri. from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.).
- Household memberships are \$42.50. This applies to anyone living at the same address as an individual member who has already paid the \$50.75 price. This membership gives full access to the facility during regular business hours.
- Select-time memberships are \$42.50 and give full access to the facility from Monday to Friday between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. and on Sundays from noon to 7 p.m.
- Drop-ins are \$12.50 plus GST with a member or \$15 plus GST without a member.

Guests must sign in at the front desk with a piece of photo identification. Guests have access to the facility (excluding pool) and free, weekly fitness classes, subject to availability.

Physical testing upon training improves results

After signing up for a membership at The Wellness Institute every member is screened and assessed for safety upon receiving an exercising plan. Unlike a regular gym, people are asked questions about their health once they sign up. Depending on their answers they may be directed to a kinesiologist who puts together a suitable exercise and lifestyle plan.

"Our risk factors in Canada are physical inactivity...especially in Manitoba, we attribute that partly to our climate, winter is tough so we want to make sure we provide a supportive environment where people can come and be active," Nishi said.

"We've seen smoking rates in Manitoba decline but we still have more work to do. And obesity is another piece. Obesity rates are not going down, they are going up in Manitoba. We always targeted a way to prevent that but then also manage it once you have that."

If there are risk factors involved, people are sent for blood tests, the results of which allow doctors to foresee the risk of heart disease, pre-diabetes and high cholesterol in the next 10 years. Based on these results, members receive an exercise plan and diet. If they are high-risk or if they have a condition such as heart disease, they take a stress test with a cardiologist, which is covered under the membership price.

All gym equipment is accessible for people wheelchairs, walkers and canes. The staff is trained in CPR and first aid.

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