

## The exercise pill

*I suggested to Charles that he would be pleased to see all the emphasis that the Department of Health is putting on exercise.*

‘Coe, as you know, I believe that so far as good health is concerned that increase in the recreational physical activity of the middle aged and elderly was to the second half of the 20th century as was the provision of sewers to the Victorian Age!’

‘So you are enthusiastically in favour, Charles!’

*Not for the first time he surprised me,  
‘Enthusiastically? Definitely not, Coe!’*

‘Why on earth not?’

‘This approach is in danger of becoming that of the “exercise pill” – no less a pill than physical pills and like all types of pill should be the last resort in maintaining health as opposed to curing disease. It is unnecessary in the context of a healthy lifestyle.’

‘Surely you are not against the city worker going to the gym after work?’

‘No, but it is a pity that he has to do so for his daily exercise. This worker is an extreme example, unless he cycles to work this may be the only chance he has to get any exercise. Exercise should be part of life and not an add-on burden, and this is practicable for the majority of us.’

‘Surely many people enjoy the gym?’

‘Yes but many do not, just as many people jog or swim primarily for the health benefit rather than the enjoyment. Once it is done that is it for the day or week, just as it is for any other medication.’

‘So you are against the gym?’

‘Not if it is used properly, by those who are gymnasts, by those who use it for training for other sporting activities or rehabilitation, but what I am really getting at is attitude.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There should be no need to think of exercise as an inconvenient necessity to foster good health; it should come naturally from our lifestyle by making use of everyday opportunities such as climbing stairs without thinking and above all from enjoyable competitive sports and pastimes. These should be lifelong interests that really do add to the quality of life in many ways social as well as

keeping fit. These activities often lead to new friends or keeping the family’s generations together. For example, I have recently taken up golf making many new friends, play tennis with my daughter and ski with my grandchildren.’

‘But the government’s approach is not incompatible with that?’ *I replied.*

‘No,’ *he agreed,* ‘And as you rightly suggest with the extreme example of a city worker an “exercise for health” slot may be necessary, but it worries me when that approach is used for children. They should get their exercise from their natural exuberance with an increasing proportion from competitive and enjoyable games as they get older.’

‘You are thinking of gyms for obese five year olds?’

‘Precisely! When I was a child I enjoyed competitive games but hated the gym. If it had been the principle form of exercise and proscribed, or even prescribed for the benefit of my health I would have hated it more and it would have put me off any form of exercise for life.’

‘But it might become the only practicable form of exercise, as more children become addicted to video games and fewer go to school under their own steam, school playing fields are still being sold off, and teachers are less willing to give time to extracurricular activities or believe any form of competition is wrong.’

‘So you are left with five short time slots which require supreme effort and imagination to make interesting and are in danger of becoming a chore to teacher and pupil alike. The solution requires reversing the trends that you have just pointed out. This might include accepting that sometimes the child’s safety is merely used as an excuse to justify the use of a car for the convenience of the parents. The politically correct teacher should recognise that the stimulation and excitement that come from competition itself cannot be replicated in non-competitive activities, and that it gives the opportunity to learn skills valuable throughout later life in being a magnanimous winner and a good but not passive loser.’

‘To plagiarise and reverse the old aphorism familiar from my childhood “Live to exercise and not exercise to live!”’

‘I could not have put it better myself!’ *he laughed.*

## CONVERSATIONS WITH CHARLES

*I was convinced, although others may not be. Either way, it is sad that someone, who holds that exercise was to good health in the 20th century as sewers were in the 19th, is apprehensive that it may be seen not as a joy but as a necessary evil in the 21st. Ironically, shortly after the conversation Charles' point was well made when it was drawn to our attention that a city council was using the symbol of a pill to promote exercise! How medicalised has society become?*

Coemgenus