

VIEWS & REVIEWS

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Margaret McCartney: Combination of exercise and social interaction is why I love parkrun

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Long ago, at a riverside hotel, my betrothed and I went for a walk. We were joined by the hotel's dogs, yelping their delight. We had found ourselves a couple of companions who recognised the gleeful combination of social interaction and exercise.

This is the winning combination that we find in parkrun (www.parkrun.org.uk). Every Saturday at 9 am, or 9.30 am in the darker northern climes of Scotland, people gather together in parks to run 5 km around them. It's entirely free. If you want to know your time, register online and print out a barcode. That's all you need to bring. The events are run by volunteers, who usually run on other weeks themselves. In other words, the events are self sustaining.

There are commercial sponsors, but the organisation is not run for profit and is supported by only a handful of paid employees. The number of runs in the United Kingdom has grown from one in 2004 to about 300, and now more than 50 000 runners are out "parkrunning" each Saturday. And shorter runs for under 14 year olds are beginning on Sundays in many areas.

Running in a park involves none of the vile mirrors that haunt me in gyms; instead, you are surrounded by trees and grass and encouraged by marshals to keep going. Because runners are asked to do a little volunteering if possible, it's easy to get to know the regulars, and the resulting atmosphere is cheery.

I take great pleasure in seeing Lycra clad, sub-20 minute runners at the front later clapping the folk at the back as they cross the finish line, and anyone is welcome to walk for some or all of the course or to take part in a wheelchair. Parkrun includes old and young runners.

Personal statistics are available for even the slowest runner to analyse on the website—total runs, volunteering, age grading, fastest time this year—meaning that runners always have something to aim for (including coveted T shirts for people who complete 50, 100, or 250 runs). And what delights me most is that a quarter of people taking part don't describe themselves

as runners; overweight and middle aged people are well represented, as are people with limiting disabilities.¹

I have a bias: I love parkrun. You might, too. Social interaction is associated with longer life,² and exercise is associated with reduced mortality.³ The Olympics were never going to get the nation doing a decent amount of exercise.⁴ But community running—inclusive, interactive, and regular runs for ordinary people—is something that might actually make a difference.

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: I'm an NHS GP partner, with income partly dependent on Quality and Outcomes Framework points. I'm a part time undergraduate tutor at the University of Glasgow. I've written two books and earn from broadcast and written freelance journalism. I'm an unpaid patron of Healthwatch. I make a monthly donation to Keep Our NHS Public. I'm a member of Medact. I'm occasionally paid for time, travel, and accommodation to give talks or have locum fees paid to allow me to give talks but never for any drug or public relations company. I was elected to the national council of the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2013 and am chair of its standing group on overdiagnosis. I have invested a small amount of money in a social enterprise, Who Made Your Pants?

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Stevinson C, Hickson M. Exploring the public health potential of a mass participation event. *J Public Health* 2014;36:268-74.
- 2 Holt-Lunstand J, Smith T, Layton JB. Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med* 2010;7:e1000316.
- 3 Nocon M, Hiemann T, Müller-Riemenschneider F, Thalau F, Roll S, Willich SN. Association of physical activity with all cause and cardiovascular mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Eur J Cardiovasc Prev Rehabil* 2008;15:239-46.
- 4 Mahtani KR, Protheroe J, Slight SP, Demarzo MM, Blakeman T, Barton CA, et al. Can the London 2012 Olympics "inspire a generation" to do more physical or sporting activities? An overview of systematic reviews. *BMJ Open* 2013;3:e002058.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;350:h230

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