



## Editorials

### Take a holiday—it's good for you

Mel Borins, MD, CCFP, FCFP

I have known many patients with physical and emotional illnesses who were transformed by taking holidays. There is something therapeutic about going away from the daily routines of life and being exposed to different environments. Every vacation has merit. For some people, even a 1-week package holiday or a weekend away can have lasting benefits. Sometimes the journey is an inward exploration, and people change the way they view themselves and their predicaments at home.

Away from home, you can let go of your history and meet people in a fresh way. Temporarily, you can drop your guise of being a doctor, and no one needs to know your life story. Often you are exposed to different kinds of people from various cultures and backgrounds, and so you develop or rely on different aspects of your own personality. This allows you to do things "out of character."

#### Even studies support vacations

Many scientific studies support this point of view. Research shows that a lack of vacations might be contributing to coronary heart disease. In Framingham, Mass, 749 women aged 45 to 64 were studied from 1965 to 1985. Between 1965 and 1967, a psychosocial interview was given along with coronary risk factor data. The women studied were all free of heart disease at the time the questionnaire was given, and their age, blood pressure level, cholesterol level, smoking habits, and other heart disease risk factors were considered. They were asked about their attitudes toward money, children, religion, and many psychosocial factors in a 300-item psychosocial questionnaire. The women were then followed over the next 20 years, and the incidence of heart attacks and coronary death was measured. Both homemakers and employed women who took fewer vacations had significantly more heart attacks. Homemakers who reported that they had a vacation once every 6 years or less had almost twice the risk of developing myocardial infarction or coronary death as homemakers who took vacations two or more times per year.<sup>1</sup>

Brooks Gump and Karen Mathews<sup>2</sup> interviewed 12 338 men between the ages of 35 and 57 and asked them every year for 5 years whether they took a vacation. Compared with men who never took vacations, men going on annual vacations were 21% less likely to die over the next 9 years and 32% less likely to die of coronary heart disease.<sup>2</sup>

Other studies have shown health benefits of vacations. At the Veteran's Administrative Medical Center in Iowa City, Iowa,<sup>3</sup> mini-vacations were instituted because many patients receiving maintenance dialysis were unable to travel because of health problems, lack of family members with whom to vacation, or limited financial resources. The hospital staff noted that patients who had previously appeared isolated or withdrawn were now able to have conversations after the vacation. Staff members also noted improved compliance in taking medications and following the medical treatment plan. The mini-vacations appeared to "lift the aura of depression," which was part of the emotional trauma of dealing with prolonged illness. The benefits to patients, their families, and hospital staff members could never be measured in dollars. Being able to take a holiday enhanced their emotional and social lives.<sup>3</sup>

#### Vacations for the mentally challenged

Vacations Unlimited is a travel service run through Community Living Mississauga, a city just outside of Toronto, Ont. Since 1980, they have been taking mentally challenged adults on vacations. The program emphasizes the importance of letting participants make their own decisions and be involved in planning their vacations. These vacations have made a big difference in helping to increase happiness and joy in the lives of these people.

Dr Sharon Hymer<sup>4</sup> wrote an article entitled "An alternative to the 'traumatizing' vacation: the enriching, expansive vacation," which was published in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*. She believes vacations can enhance new insights

of both analysts and patients involved in psychoanalysis and can enrich both self and relationships with others. Patients might take more risks and apply some of the insights they learned in therapy. Travel presents opportunities to discover aspects of the self that were suppressed at home. By "emptying" themselves of everyday concerns and anxieties, she thought both analysts and patients would benefit.<sup>4</sup>

Drs Edward and John Rhoads<sup>5</sup> also discussed how regularly planned vacations can benefit psychotherapy. In the *Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis*, they reported that such interruptions allow analysts and patients to look at their lives from a less intense vantage point. This gives patients time to integrate what they learned in therapy.<sup>5</sup>

Other studies found a positive relationship between vacations and intellectual functioning<sup>6</sup>; an increase in life satisfaction after a vacation<sup>7</sup>; that vacations were strongly beneficial to family life<sup>8</sup>; that burnout of employees decreased significantly during their vacations and work efficiency increased<sup>9</sup>; and that jobs were more interesting after their vacations.<sup>10</sup>

Carin Rubenstein<sup>11</sup> analyzed 10 309 questionnaires from a survey of readers of *Psychology Today*. "Thirty seven percent said they needed time off to rest, recharge their batteries and get renewed. Eighteen percent said their primary reason for a vacation was to learn. They go away to seek intellectual or spiritual enrichment, to investigate places they have never seen or to discover their roots."<sup>11</sup> Others chose to go away for family togetherness, exotic adventure, self-discovery, and escaping routines.<sup>11</sup>

### Retirement disaster

In 1981, my wife Bonnie and I spent a few days on Beachcomber Island, a tiny island in Fiji, in the Pacific Ocean. I was told a story about a 68-year-old physician who slaved at his job for years but finally decided to retire and take it easy. Three months later he died of a heart attack. This kind of retirement disaster is not uncommon. In Fiji we met Barry and Sylvia Rabinovitch. Barry, now a respirologist in Montreal, Que, had just finished his postgraduate training. Amazingly enough, 2 months later, on Kuta Beach in Bali, we met them again and ended up sharing a great deal of time together, exploring Bali.

Barry believed that traveling has greatly affected him. He explained.

After my medical training I took a 6 month sabbatical and traveled extensively throughout the

world. Before traveling, I was truly a type A personality who was preoccupied with work. After being exposed to different cultures and seeing the way the world operated away from home, I gained a totally different perspective on my life. I realized that there was more to life than medicine and began to shift my priorities to have more leisure time. Although I still enjoy my work, I am much more well-rounded, less time-focused, and more able to relax. Traveling brought a new dimension to my life.

Getting away helps us distance ourselves from the stressful parts of our lives. If medicine has been overwhelming, relationships too demanding, or lifestyle not healthy, then getting away can be a tremendous relief. It can help restore your perspective, give you new viewpoints, and allow you to develop new strategies to cope. Simply being out of your stressful environment can make you aware of just how crazy your life has been and can make you determined to change.

### Where there's a will...

Many people argue that traveling is too expensive. Others worry that, if they go away, they will miss out on work or financial opportunities. Vacation and travel are investments in life rather than investments you salt away in the bank; you do have time for both. Moreover, you do not have to spend your life savings to enjoy a holiday. If you are low on cash, then you might have to travel by car or bus to visit and stay with relatives or friends. This is easier on the pocketbook. You might have to use your resourcefulness and creativity to think of places to visit that do not require much money, such as camping, going on trips with service organizations, or simply searching for a bargain with a travel agent. Often the decision to travel is a matter of priorities.

Some people would not think twice about buying an expensive suit or dress but would not consider using that money for a vacation. Some have thousands of dollars in the bank but have no desire to leave home or take a few weeks away, except on business. Yet many people live frugally and save all their money for their next holiday. They would rather travel than buy one more material possession, gamble at the racetrack, or splurge on a fancy meal or expensive bottle of wine. Sometimes getting away might actually save you money in the long run. It might be cheaper to improve your marriage or prevent job burnout than to pay for psychotherapy or mood-altering drugs.

The expression "where there's a will there's a way" can apply to taking vacations. Even if you are currently not in a position to travel or take a vacation, you might be in the future. I met a young couple who financially were unable to travel but won a free trip to Colombia. I have known people who were given cottages by relatives and friends for a few weeks when they were not being used. I have had patients who were given holidays as gifts by their parents or even bosses. One of my patients who, because of a disability, had been on welfare for years inherited money and was able to take his first-ever vacation. Another patient who received welfare payments was treated to a free trip by her boyfriend because he did not want to go to Florida by himself. Think positively and keep dreaming even if you cannot afford a trip right now.

I have known patients and doctors who say they will work really hard for however long it takes to save enough money to retire, and then they will have time to travel. Although they keep working their hearts out, they never seem to retire. Then when they finally do, they get some catastrophic illness and cannot enjoy their time off. There is no better reason than your own mortality to remind you to take a break.

Vacations are one of the best ways to recharge your batteries, step off the treadmill of life, and begin to see things in a different perspective. Holidays are healing. Physician, heal thyself.

#### Acknowledgment

*I thank Rita Shaughnessy at the University of Toronto for assistance with research.*

*Dr Borins is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario. His new book, Go Away Just for the Health of It, will be published in December.*

*Correspondence to: Dr Mel Borins, 27 Roncesvalles Ave, Suite 405, Toronto, ON M6R 3B2*

#### References

1. Eaker ED, Pinsky J, Castelli WP. Myocardial infarction and coronary death among women: psychosocial predictors from a 20-year follow-up of women in the Framingham study. *Am J Epidemiol* 1992;135:854-64.
2. Gump B, Matthews K. Are vacations good for your health? the 9 year mortality experience after the multiple risk factor intervention trial. *Psychosom Med* 2000;62:608-12.
3. Roy Carroll. Mini-vacations with center dialysis patients: a three year summary. *Soc Work Health Care* 1982;8(2):117-23.
4. Hymer S. An alternative to the "traumatizing" vacation: the enriching, expansive vacation. *Am J Psychoanal* 1993;53(2):143-57.
5. Rhoads E, Rhoads J. The benefits of vacation/interruptions in psychoanalysis. *J Clin Psychoanal* 1995;4(2):209-22.
6. Sands D. The relationship of stressful life events to intellectual functioning in women over 65. *Int J Aging Human Dev* 1981;14(1):11-22.
7. Hoopes L, Lounsbury J. An investigation of life satisfaction following a vacation: a domain-specific approach. *J Community Psychol* 1989;17:129-40.
8. Borins M. *Go away just for the health of it*. Toronto, Ont: Wholistic Press; 2000.
9. Westman M, Eden D. Effects of a respite from work on burnout: vacation relief and fade-out. *J Applied Psychol* 1997;82:516-27.
10. Klausner WJ. An experiment in leisure. *Sci J* 1968;4:81-5.
11. Rubenstein C. PT's survey report on how Americans view vacations. *Psychol Today* 1980;13(12):62-6,71-6.