

Motion like lotion for healthy joints

Shannon Linden | Posted: Friday, November 20, 2015 8:49 pm

There were a lot of potential knee replacements gathered for MLA Norm Letnick's latest health forum, but it was standing room only in the crowded classroom at Okanagan College.

More than 100 people showed up on Nov. 10 to learn about healthy joints and the Minister of Agriculture was delighted.

"The only other topic that got this many people out was on death and dying," he said.

But this talk — focusing on managing existing arthritis, preparing for joint replacements and keeping damaging inflammation at bay in the first place — was very much about living our best lives by moving as much as we can.

Megan Smaha, a volunteer speaker from the B.C. and Yukon Arthritis Society, was diagnosed with inflammatory arthritis in 2008. Forced to leave her job as an RN with the B.C. Cancer Agency, she had several surgeries before seeking help from the Arthritis Society's Kelowna office.

Learning to manage her chronic pain changed her life. Now a leader, she runs workshops and teaches others to complement their medical care with self-exploration techniques.

The most commonly diagnosed chronic disease in the country; arthritis affects one in six Canadians—some 4.6 million people.

"It's a leading cause of long-term disability," Smaha said, "and with 60 per cent of those affected being of working age, it has a big impact on the country's socio-economic picture."

About two-thirds of sufferers are women and there is no cure. Children can also be affected.

An inflammation of the joints (the place where bones articulate), there are dozens of types of arthritis. Smaha addressed two of the most common.

Rheumatoid is an autoimmune arthritis that occurs when the body's immune system essentially attacks itself, affecting the synovium — the thin layer of tissue that lubricates joints and keeps cartilage healthy. Those who suffer this form of arthritis are often referred to rheumatologists.

Osteoarthritis is just plain old wear and tear and the breakdown of cartilage tissue that occurs with life. Naturally, the older we get, the more vulnerable we become; however, this process can be sped up by infections or injury to the joints.

“There’s no magic pill when it comes to osteoarthritis,” Smaha said, “and there’s a narrow window to get on the right therapy, but you can do something.”

That something may seem counterintuitive for those in pain, but all of the experts addressing the crowd agreed: You’ve got to move it, move it.

“Exercise is the only thing we know that builds tissue,” Interior Health physiotherapist Norm Hanson said.

“Surgery and medication are not magic; they allow you to exercise — and movement heals the body. It’s what we’re meant to do.”

“Saving yourself” for exercise by delegating duties like housework, using tools like reachers and button helpers and relaxing to avoid the tension that exacerbates arthritic flare-ups, will help you move where it counts most.

“The best kind of exercise is the one you’ll do,” Hanson said. He and colleagues offer free consultations through Interior Health’s Physio Navigator, offered at Parkinson Recreation Centre and other locations. For more information call 250 470-0638.

“Every kind of arthritis is exercise capable,” Hanson said.

Heidi Howay, a nurse with IH’s Arthroplasty Surgical Optimization Clinic agreed: “Motion is lotion.”

Like her fellow speakers, she stressed the importance of keeping a healthy body weight. “For every extra pound you carry, you put four to six pounds of stress on joints.”

The main goal of any joint treatment is reducing pain and preventing further damage. As such, Howay advised avoiding activities that increase stress on damaged joints — thing like jumping and deep squats. And for goodness sake, take pain medication if it helps.

“People will have knee surgery but they won’t take Tylenol,” she said. “The benefits outweigh the risks if the medication keeps you moving.”

Howay spends most of her time consulting with patients who are navigating the health-care system. They’ve gone from their family docs to orthopedic surgeons, to waiting lists for joint replacements.

“When you get to the top of the surgery waiting list — anywhere from six months to a year in Kelowna — that’s when you see me,” she said.

Howay educates patients about what to expect from surgery and how to manage when they get home.

Thanks to aging baby boomers, experts predict a significant rise in joint replacement surgeries over the coming years. “We’re looking at a lot of hips and knees,” Howay said.

At the end of the day, preventing illness and injury is the ideal. “We teach health and wellness,” physiotherapist Hanson said. “How do I avoid going to the doctor?”

As for our MLA, he left with the same take-home message as his guests: “Keep moving and get rid of that excess weight,” he said.

Using the Myfitnesspal app and “a little self-discipline,” Letnick lost 15 pounds over the past year.

“The right weight and 30 minutes of daily exercise has made a world of difference for my joints and overall health,” he said. “If I can do it, so can others.”

For more information, contact Letnick’s office at normletnickmla.ca or call 250-765-8516.

Shannon Linden writes a blog, magazine articles, and grocery lists. Her health and humour column runs weekly. Visit her at shannonlinden.ca.