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Nothing But a Number

81 Doesn't Slow Doctor, Marathon Man

By Matt L. Ottinger

There's an old adage that conveys: "If you don't want to get older, don't think old thoughts."

Dr. Walter Bortz II, an 81-year-old internist/geriatrician, author and speaker, embodies that sentiment. He believes, however, that actions trump thinking when it comes to maintaining youth.

"My main mantra is 'use it or lose it,'" says Bortz, who is also a clinical associate professor of medicine at Stanford University.

Bortz spoke in October 2010 at Ball State University as part of the Fisher Institute for Wellness and Gerontology's Kirkpatrick Lecture Series. His speech was titled, "Dare to be 100." Bortz gives 40 speeches annually and has written seven books on aging and wellness. Additionally, Bortz runs one marathon every year and will embark upon his 41st consecutive race in late July in San Francisco.

"Why stop?" he asks. "Just because I'm 81 doesn't mean I'm going to stop."

He explains that his passion for longevity began when he was 39.

"I was a hot shot scientist with a capacity in metabolism and fat, obesity and diabetes," Bortz recalls. "Then, my father died, and he was a great physician and a great man, and he had an interest in aging. And when he died, I came here to Stanford and they said 'we want you to be an aging expert.'"

"Now we know what health and aging is; we didn't know 40 years ago," he adds. "But I've had a lot to do with founding the science of aging."

Turning back the clock

Bortz argues that fitness is a 30-year age offset, asserting that at 81 years of age he is "like an unfit 50-year-old."

"My body is 30 years younger because I'm fit," he says. "(Fitness is) cheap and safe and powerful."

He argues the key to health not only begins with exercise, but extroversion.

"I always resort to the most powerful single word – engagement," Bortz conveys. "That comes in multiple levels – keep your body, muscles and brain engaged. Nature has no tolerance for stagnation. Engagement also has a very strong social implication. Hermits don't live a long time; people need people."

For Bortz, having a wife (Ruth Anne) who just completed



Dr. Walter Bortz not only runs marathons at age 81, but also continues to write books intended to change the way Americans and their government approach health and wellness.

the Boston Marathon at 80 years of age is proof that having a partner also engaged in fitness is beneficial.

“There’s a popular book out now called *The Longevity Strategy* that documents a study I’ve been involved with here at Stanford, tracking people over 80 years or so,” he reports. “It shows that married people live longer; there’s a strong reason for that.”

Changing the approach

When asked what mistakes people make when it comes to exercising, Bortz bluntly states, “They watch too much television.”

He adds, “Television shortens your life. It also makes you dumb. There’s evidence that all these problems with Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease have to do with sitting on your rump too much.”

Bortz also contends the American diet is a key culprit in enhancing the aging process.

“Unfortunately, we’ve become experts at making tasty, cheap food that is too convenient,” he offers. “It should be the other way around. The cheapest food should be the best food, so we should make some governmental effort to subsidize good food. The thing that’s killing us now is obesity.”

He points to a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicating the next generation of Americans won’t live as long, calling it “unacceptable.” Bortz also points to the consumption of junk food and sodas as contributing to a national diet that he deems “disgraceful.”

“I just came back from China and they’re terrified because they’re starting to eat like we do,” he relays. “It’s one thing for America to have 200 million people overweight, but what would it be like for China to have five billion people overweight? You can’t afford it.”

All about business

Bortz asserts that American businesses, along with the health care industry and the government, should reward health – not sickness.

“My new book says that the entire medical system is perverted, because disease pays,” he claims. “Disease has two simple approaches – surgery and pharmacy. (The medical industry) wants you to have something wrong when you come into (a doctor’s) office that we can give you a prescription for or operate on you for. It should not pay to be sick.”

He adds that Americans should be incentivized to be healthy, and workplace wellness programs are starting to reflect that.

“That’s what industry is starting to look at,” Bortz asserts. “They can’t afford steel or coffee because they’re paying so much for sick people. But what if people weren’t so sick? Maybe they could afford those things and be more competitive. The industry is catching up now. Our laws had been so constructed that companies did not have incentive to have healthy employees. They just keep passing the cost of sickness onto the taxpayer, but now the taxpayer is starting to get it.”

He notes former White House Budget Director Peter Orszag recently spoke at Stanford and contended that

America can’t afford its health care system any longer.

“(Orszag said) the leading cause of bankruptcy in America is health bills,” Bortz discloses. “That’s awful. So what can we do to change that around? That’s my business – trying to make people understand.”

He says the first step for everyone when it comes to getting healthy is to take personal inventory and responsibility.

“Who owns (your health)?” he asks. “Do you think the Mayo Clinic owns it? Or Walgreen’s? Or do you own it? The only appropriate answer is ‘you own it.’ If you sit around waiting for some friendly doctor or pharmacist to make you well, that’s a forlorn and false hope.”

Bortz’s latest book, *Next Medicine: The Science and Civics of Health*, was recently released and contends the structure of America’s health care system is threatening the nation’s stability. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* called it “a clear manifesto for better attention to public health and reorientation of the medical system toward prevention.”



INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Dr. Walter Bortz II at www.walterbortz.com