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Blokes' guide to fitness

By Elspeth McLean

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Dr Dave Baldwin might work in Bulls, but he is not a man to mince words, mate.

Ask him if he could be described as a medical version of Barry Crump, and he says he doesn't know about that, but he does know he has a wonderful life which combines his love of the outdoors, flying, a loving family and his medical practice.

As for what he is called, well, he doesn't give the rear end of a rat about that (my genteel translation).

What he would like, however, is for blokes, and the sheilas who love them, to take heed of the advice he gives in his down-to-earth blokes' guide to being healthy, *Healthy Bastards*, published by Random House.

He would like blokes to recognise they are walking around in a beautifully designed machine - "they forget that, as they are trotting between the pub and maybe going pig shooting".

They needed to take "ownership and responsibility" for that beautiful machine, because it was like a car, if you did not take care of it, "within 10 years it's bugged".

If regular oil changes and other checks were taken, the car could still be here 80 years down the track, shiny and polished.

One of the most important things men could do was develop a rapport with a GP, Dr Baldwin said.

Many blokes stayed well away from doctors, and were suspicious of them.

Then, when illness struck, they visited any GP, who could turn out to be someone they did not like, which added to their hatred of doctors.

There was a huge variety of personalities among GPs, and if men chose one they got on well with and trusted, it meant they would find it easier to go to that person "when the chips are down".

Dr Baldwin (52) readily admitted his style did not suit everyone.

"I am a fairly non-PC guy."

While he did not mean to upset people, his straight-talking - "I won't rabbit on to you" - did not always meet with approval.

Other doctors in his practice could cater for those people.



He found a good way of working with men to make changes in their lives was to get their partners onside because they did not want their loved ones to die.



He self-published and illustrated the original version of his book, *Fitness to Fly for Healthy Bastards*, which was geared toward modern aviators and "anyone out there in the great unwashed (i.e. those who can't fly) who is interested in their personal health".

His 700 copies sold out, and he found many of those who bought the book were not involved with aviation.

It showed him there was a need for a book about men's health which did not fit the criteria of being what he calls "literary sleeping pills" and "full of stuff for the worried well, with big words no-one can say, let alone spell".

It also concerned him that in his general practice in Bulls, he was seeing a hard-core group of "unhealthy bastards".

"I know, because I sign the death certificates."

Then, in his other practice, the Bulls Flying Doctor Service, in which he provides medical checks for pilots in far-flung parts of the country, he found he was seeing some 80-year-olds getting private pilot's licences, "jumping around like jack rabbits, still happy".

It made him ask whether there was something more he could have been doing to prevent some men's early deaths, and he thought publishing a down-to-earth book on men's health might help.

(He had included a section in his latest book for sheilas, and he noted that a few of them "don't give a damn" about their health either.) The fact that he got into medicine at all was "one of those life quirks".

He described his school academic achievements as "very mediocre".

He was more interested in rugby than with being aligned with "what I call brainy bastards".

After Tawa College he went to Victoria University to do surveying, but dropped out after about four months.

He drove vans, and did a roof tiling apprenticeship.

His mother, Olive, the author of nine books herself, kept at me. She saw me as the great brainy hope in the family".

To "shut her up", he said he would complete a bachelor of science degree and then he would go deer culling.

He went to Massey University where he decided to give it his "best shot", spending "24 hours a day in the library in the first year".

What staggered him was that he "started getting the same grades as those little fellas with glasses".

With a BSc under his belt, he applied for medical school at the University of Otago, and after an interview "to explain my chequered career and explain why I wasn't a brainy bastard at college", he was accepted, graduating in 1984.

He loved Dunedin. He had many relatives here and the area was familiar to him because as a youngster he and his three siblings had spent time with his mother's family, the Garraways, at Parera.

He still felt "like part of the place". He was looking forward to a reunion of his medical school mates at Labour Weekend.

During his training, each time he did a stint in a specialty, that was what he wanted to specialise in.

That made him realise he was ideally suited to becoming a general practitioner.

Dr Baldwin seriously considered buying into a practice in Te Anau where he spent some time after graduating, "mainly to fit in with the roar, to be quite honest", but he and his wife Sandi's families were in the North Island so they moved back to Palmerston North to be closer to them.

The couple have three adult children.

He almost became a cardiologist, training at Palmerston North Hospital, but "through a twist of fate" his pilot's exams coincided with the specialist exams and the pilot's exams won out.

He spent three years at the RNZAF base at Ohakea becoming the base medical officer and developing his sub-specialty, aviation medicine.

After leaving there he began the Bulls Medical Centre, near the base, and then went on to develop the Bulls Flying Doctor Service.

One of the best things about the flying doctor service was that it allowed him to visit his favourite parts of the country regularly, including his beloved Te Anau.

Dr Baldwin is a happy man who enjoys a yarn and a laugh. Ask him what part humour plays in medicine and he does not hesitate.

"Laughter is the best medicine. End of story."

In life people needed to work and they needed to love. "That includes laughter. You need to love people and be loved. Laughter is everything, mate."

elspeth.mclean@odt.co.nz

• Dr Dave on...

Sexually transmitted diseases

"STDs are not to be treated lightly. They are very common, and although all sections of society around the world are at risk, I believe Kiwis may well be more at risk due to their extreme physical attractiveness and the extensive amount of travel they undertake to high-risk areas."

Alcohol

"Some people say an alcoholic is anyone who drinks more than their doctor, but I refute that one."

Anaerobic exercise

"...doesn't have anywhere near as many health benefits as aerobic exercise. It has its uses, though; you never know when you'll need to sprint for a bus, or help a mate shift a fridge when he or she's moving house."

Antioxidants

"The whole idea of taking lots of Omega-3 is very appealing... Be careful of overdosing, though. The classic signs include the development of scales under your armpits and then, with time, finding yourself wandering aimlessly around paddling pools flapping your arms and holding your mouth open like a fish."

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