

PRIME OF HEALTH

Sports medicine is for everyone

It can restore even non-sportsmen back to fighting fit condition, reports CLARISSA TAN

FASTER, higher, stronger - that's what most of us want to be. Sure, the Olympic athletes heading for Beijing this summer will be the fastest, highest and strongest in the world, but it doesn't mean that the rest of us mortals shouldn't go for gold too.



Help is at hand: The SSMC (above), located at Novena Medical Centre, has a fully equipped gym designed to cater to all fitness levels and rehabilitation modalities

Still, as those of us with a gym membership know only too well, it's not always easy to feel fighting fit. The more active among us may suffer injuries from time to time. Or we could be struggling against a more general, persistent condition - being overweight, for example.

That's where sports medicine comes in, said Benedict Tan, medical director of the Singapore Sports Medicine Centre (SSMC) and three-time national Sportsman of the Year.

'Sports medicine is a medical discipline that caters to the needs of the physically active and of those who want to be physically active,' said the doctor, who obtained his Masters of Sports Medicine from the Australian Institute of Sports, University of Canberra in 1997.

Dr Tan won the gold medal in the 1994 Asian Games and in consecutive Southeast Asian Games from 1989 to 1995, as a Laser sailor. As if these weren't enough, he now writes articles for global medical journals and was the author of Fight the Fat - What You Must Know and Do to Lose Weight, which is meant for the layman.

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The Singapore Sports Medicine Centre aims to be a comprehensive facility for injury management, injury prevention, performance enhancement and multi-disciplinary weight management (which applies to general physical fitness, as well as to athletes hoping to make a certain weight category). The centre claims to see to your needs whether you compete as a sportsman, exercise recreationally, or are sedentary and wish to embark on an exercise programme.

For instance, there was the middle-aged runner who was having difficulties due to a pain at the back of his heel, said Dr Tan. The runner's condition was accurately diagnosed and he was treated with one of the latest therapeutic advancements called extracorporeal shock wave treatment (ESWT), followed by rehabilitation. The athlete recovered and subsequently completed the Sundown Ultramarathon - all 84 kilometres of it - successfully, 'without pain and in good time', said Dr Tan.

Or take the 48-year-old woman who weighed 68 kg, with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 28.7, when she first entered the sports centre. By the end of the programme, she had lost 14.9 kg, trimmed 30 cm off her waist and normalised her BMI to 22.3, said Dr Tan. More importantly, she managed to maintain her weight and now, two years after the programme, she remains a svelte 55 kg.

'Not only was she happy with her weight loss and maintenance, she greatly appreciated her new-found fitness, which enabled her to engage in physical activities that she never thought possible,' he said.

The SSMC, located at Novena Medical Centre, has a fully equipped gym designed to cater to all fitness levels and rehabilitation modalities, such as physiotherapy, exercise testing, pre-participation screening, gait analysis and podiatry. It is the largest sports medicine centre in the private sector in Singapore, said Dr Tan.

Dr Tan is also head and senior consultant sports physician at the Changi Sports Medicine Centre, the biggest such facility in the public sector.

Besides top athletes and regular gym enthusiasts, the SSMC's clients include those whose conditions require exercise intervention, such as the elderly, diabetics and those suffering from coronary artery disease, military personnel, and performing artists such as dancers and musicians. Dr Tan recalled the case of a dancer who developed a pain in her back less than two weeks before an important performance. She underwent intensive

physiotherapy and managed to perform pain-free.

'Diving and altitude medicine are part of sports medicine as well,' added Dr Tan.

Sports medicine being such a broad field, the staff and doctors of the SSMC include sports physicians, physiotherapists, podiatrists, dieticians, sports massage therapists and sports trainers, who are like personal trainers but are also trained to handle clinical conditions.

'Sports medicine aims to get injured patients back to their pre-injury level of sport or higher, and to do so expeditiously and safely,' said Dr Tan. 'This can be achieved by accurate diagnosis, effective therapeutic modalities, and effective assessment and management of underlying causes.'

He said that some of the latest advancements in diagnosis include bedside musculo-skeletal ultrasound sonography, which offers instant diagnosis and assessment of the severity of an injury. Therapeutic modalities include ESWT, while there are now better tools to identify the underlying causes of an injury, said Dr Tan.

'For example, if a runner gets recurrent stress fractures, we can do a video gait analysis to identify the fault in the patient's running technique and correct his running biomechanics.'

A sports physician's scope of work also includes offering medical coverage at events such as football or rugby matches, the management of exercise-related medical conditions (such as exercise-induced asthma or menstrual problems), and anti-doping practices.

And, of course, sports medicine plays a primary role in the most glittering sports event of all, the Olympics.

'For our Singaporean athletes heading for Beijing, their annual pre-participation screening, injury management, performance enhancement are all done by sports physicians,' said Dr Tan. 'The team physician accompanying the team to Beijing is also a sports physician; likewise, for all the other teams.'

There are also sports physicians at regulatory bodies such as the IOC Medical Commission, the medical commissions of the international federations of the various sports, the World Anti-Doping Agency and Therapeutic Use Exemption Committees, which give dispensations to athletes for using certain drugs if there are valid medical reasons.

Though a high-level athlete himself, Dr Tan is steadfastly against the idea that sports medicine is only for what he calls 'elite' sports participants such as Tyson Gay or Yao Ming.

'In the past, sports medicine was the exclusive privilege of elite athletes,' he said. 'But we should not assume that only the elite athlete needs to have his problems managed with urgency.'

'An elderly lady who does her daily tai chi at the neighbourhood park with her friends will miss her tai chi no less.'