

Education through recreation

By this time of year, many specialty societies will have completed their annual meetings or winter symposia, where members obtain most of their annual continuing professional development credits. The initial reason for the timing was the opportunity to meet in a ski resort where the day could be split between winter recreation and continuing medical education. Ironically, just as the term for the latter activity was broadened to include other professional attributes, the opportunities for leisure were restricted by a seemingly endless wave of puritanical reform that reduced the acceptability of ski resorts as sites for academic meetings. While it is essential for surgeons to be free of even the appearance of being subject to influence, the reluctance to mix work with leisure runs counter to a century of progress.

The pervasiveness of this reluctance became clear to me when I met with a group of Western University medical students to write a report regarding an after-hours surgical anatomy club. Club meetings are held in the anatomy laboratory, where a surgical team is invited to demonstrate an operation on a cadaver. Following the laboratory portion, the group retires to the university pub for free-ranging discussions among the students, residents and surgeons. Sessions are so popular that a booking system using social media sells out within 2 minutes. There was apprehension regarding the inclusion of the recreational component of the club in the report even though it was critical to its popularity and to its effectiveness. The challenge for the group was to describe how the pub session contributed to the success of the endeavour without compromising patient dignity or club purpose. We found our answer in the philosophy of education through recreation.¹

The concept of education through recreation was first applied in the 19th century to childhood development.² George H. Read, the Chicago sociologist who identified the developmental role of play in childhood, divided human activity into 3 general types: work, art and play.² The principle was broadened to include young adults, but the emphasis was restricted to physical activities.³ It was the basis for the rise of organized sports and initiatives such as the Olympic Games. Another Chicago sociologist, Nels Anderson, who spent a considerable part of his career at the University of

New Brunswick, developed the concept that the currency of life is time: time spent working earns time for leisure.⁴ In his book explaining this concept, Anderson referred to the English educationist Lawrence P. Jacks, who had been asked by the United States National Recreation Association to consider the matter for a booklet endorsing outdoor activities in the National Parks. Jacks' wonderful summary has been appropriated by various authors and followers of Zen Buddhism since it was written in 1932:

A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play, his labour and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself he always seems to be doing both. Enough for him that he does it well.⁵

Successful surgery requires total immersion, taking time from all 3 of life's activities: work, art and play. Surgeons rob their families of their time to achieve success. Education through recreation is the opportunity to learn in a seamless fashion through all of life's activities. The concept is as valid as its close relative, lifelong learning, which is considered to be the basis for continuing professional development.

Vivian C. McAlister, MB

Coeditor, *Canadian Journal of Surgery*

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