

# Health Spas — Can They Slow the Progress of Disability?

*What can we learn from European holistic programs?*

by Sunny Roller, M.A.

One sunny May morning I was getting ready to go to work and glanced in the bathroom mirror. At the moment my blue eyes looked back at me, the reality struck. I felt good. I was enwrapped with an all-over sense of well-being. My body felt energized. My spirit was nourished and my thoughts were flowing, positive and creative. Even though 42 years with polio dictated that I lurch about using two long-leg braces and Lofstrand crutches, I felt

fit, healthy and completely ready to join the day's lively participants outside my apartment.

I can't forget that feeling. Where it came from, who knows? But I loved it. Within a few days I surmised that this must be how people who are physically fit feel most of the time. What could I do to feel this way more often? I had been through post-polio re-rehabilitation and learned to pace myself. But what if I was holistically out of shape? De-conditioned? For the first time in my life, I began to think about the possible benefits of participating in a wellness program. Maybe I could be 40-something, have a disability, and consistently feel a healthy glow all at the same time. I had never seriously considered this possibility of feeling really good before that inspiring May morning over three years ago.

A wellness program. Could I participate in my own personal set of

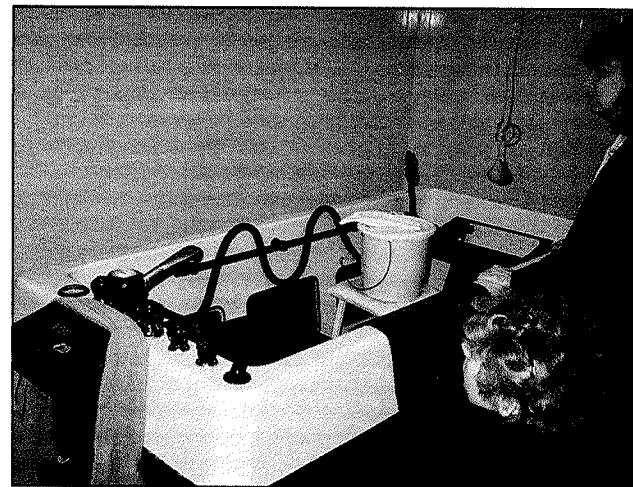
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Sunny talks with Dr. Horerer, an orthopedic physician, about the benefits of wellness programs for disabled people.

health-promoting activities during the course of the day by myself? Wouldn't it be fun, on the other hand, to be part of an upbeat group of people who are experiencing honest fun, fellowship and fitness in an accessible setting? Why not do everything possible to get fit and stay well? Mind, body and spirit. How would I do it? Is it really feasible? How could it work? Could my friends with similar disabilities also join a wellness program in our town? Would they want to? Wellness programs for us?

After a little research, I discovered that our country has neglected the wellness needs of people with disabilities. My friends Frederick Maynard, M.D., Eva



Sunny and Eva learn about a therapeutic tub that includes electrical stimulation at one of the spas/clinics they visited.

Wortz (health educator) and I discussed the serious gap in our health care system for people with lifelong disabilities; and we decided to learn what we could abroad.

Sponsored by a grant from the World Institute on Disability and the International Polio Network, Eva and I flew to Germany to learn more about holistic wellness programs for people with disabilities. A holistic wellness program considers the whole person as a unit with interlaced parts that have a dramatic effect on each other. Holistic wellness programs include exercise, nutrition and lifestyle enhancement therapies (including stress management). Both conventional and nonconventional treatments are used. The goal of a holistic wellness program is to maximize a person's physical, mental and emotional health.

In November 1992, we visited and stayed at three Bavarian health spas. We observed sample treatments and asked questions about the unique European techniques and methods of support for helping people who are growing older with chronic neuromuscular impairments to stay well and prevent new disabilities. What could we learn and then apply to our country?

In the U.S., our mental picture of a spa is a building that houses equipment and pools like Vic Tanny or Silhouette. Very healthy people go to these spas to get more healthy. A spa might also mean a tanning salon or may simply be another word for a hot tub. In Germany, spas are very different. They are like small towns. They are made up of hotels, restaurants, churches and

shops. There are clinics and various treatment centers that house swimming pools and specially equipped treatment rooms. Spas have parks, tennis courts, lakes and concert halls. Many doctors and therapists have offices right on the spa grounds. Spas are scenically beautiful...the peaceful pools and mountain lakes, the glittering elegance in small shop windows, the contented humming chit-chat of strolling guests all work together to lift spirits and create positive attitudes that lead to good health. As we made our way around the grounds, we realized that Americans with disabilities can't rush to check into a European spa, but we might be able to create similar opportunities for ourselves at home.

People with disabilities can take part in their own customized wellness programs at European spas for 3-8 weeks to rejuvenate and prevent health deterioration. The accessible spa clinics (residential buildings with all the necessary treatment facilities and equipment) we visited looked like hotels and offered a long list of therapies. We learned that these clinics would be ideal places for people with severe disabilities to participate in a holistic wellness program because all treatments could be completed in this one barrier-free and accessible building. People who are able to walk longer distances over more difficult terrain could stay at a regular spa hotel and walk from building to building to receive treatments. Everyone who goes to a spa must first be evaluated by a physician.

At the spas we visited, partici-

pants staying at the spa clinics must receive a battery of tests to assess strengths and deficits. Then physicians collaborate with therapists and the participant to set up an individualized program. This customized treatment must take into consideration the late effects of the neuromuscular disability — like polio or spinal cord injury. The treatments then include traditional physical and occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychotherapy, stress reduction, independent living training, healthful diet participation and counseling. Unconventional medical treatments include massage, mud baths, aroma and herbal therapy. The mud bath felt great...imagine 30 minutes of moist heat permeating, soothing knotted back muscles and sore spinal joints. As Americans on tour,

we asked if the outcomes of unconventional therapies such as some of those practiced at the German spas could be studied in our country to determine their effectiveness in preventing secondary disabilities? Could model pilot programs be set up to study the effectiveness of a wellness program for individuals who are growing older with a lifelong disability?

An important part of the spa experience is the educational programming that accompanies the actual therapies. Participants who make a serious commitment to learning new attitudes to end self-defeating health behaviors attend lectures and workshops on various health topics — from how to quit smoking to how to cook nutritional meals. Attendance at all scheduled lectures and treat-

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ments is mandatory. A long-term follow-through therapy plan is laid out and discussed with spa participants to let them know what treatments they need to do when they return home and how often they must be done. Most of the people we interviewed agreed that for a person with a disability, the full benefit of the four-to-five month good feeling would likely require a return visit, perhaps annually.

Most spas do not aggressively seek to attract people with disabilities, but all three spa directors who we interviewed revealed that with proper pre-planning they could accommodate special needs. Anyone who goes to a spa for treatments will have various amounts of reimbursement provided if they first receive a prescription from their physician. Typically a person would

wait for three to five weeks and receive a certain amount per day for food, lodging, and all treatments. Because the spa treatments, or "kur" as the Germans say it, will help keep a person healthy and able to work, preventing premature medical retirement, the person's visit is paid for by one of the state insurance programs or private health insurance. As the U.S. develops a national health care program, we ask if health care insurance will ever cover the costs of preventive health care activities like the ones we delightfully witnessed in Germany.

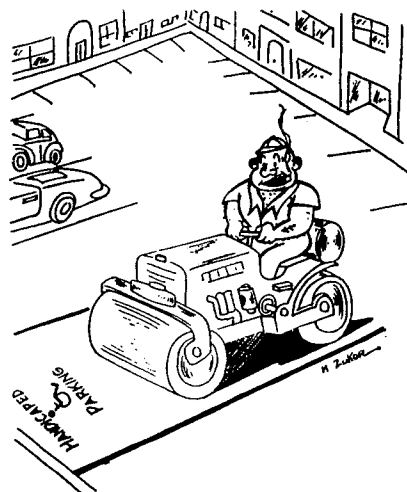
If a person with a disability lives close enough to a spa and is in need of treatment, he or she can qualify to have three or four "kurs" per week. This becomes a German version of a community-based health promotion program which people drive to regularly, rather than the live-in arrangement which is more common at the German Spas. Could special grant funding be provided in the U.S. to local groups of interested consumers and health care professionals to establish residential or commuter wellness programs for people with chronic disabilities? Would it be feasible to establish regional spas, for people who are growing older with their disability, at national facilities such as Warm Springs, Georgia, or at many of our Easter Seal Society campgrounds?

Wellness programs for us? We believe that the German health spa model should be seriously considered as one from which we can learn. This model supports the concepts of prevention as well as the independent living philosophy of per-

sonal empowerment because it promotes self-care and is dedicated to the prevention of new disability.

Based on the German health spa concept, U.S. health care professionals and we consumers could assess our nearby facilities, professional resource pool and community interest and need for potential wellness programming opportunities that would be accessible to people with disabilities. We need to ask more questions. What philosophical or physical barriers to creating customized wellness programs exist in our local communities? What program design would be most appealing to people who are growing older with their disability? What resources are already in place that could be utilized to build a health promotion program? What resources exist among public and private organizations and businesses that could be shared? Based on what we learn, adapted variations on the German spa programs could be established in U.S. cities and towns.

Why not do everything we can to get fit and stay well with our respective disabilities? Mind, body, and spirit. We possess all of the needed national, local and personal resources to get started and we can take charge of our own wellness — if we choose to do so. Feeling good is possible, but it really starts with how we'd like to feel and what we'd love to see — back in the bathroom mirror.



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