



Walk the Walk & Talk the Talk

It all began when our local doctor in Warragul, John Mag started noticing a trend. Farmers were retiring and moving from their properties to live in town. As farmers, walking was very much a part of their previous life and job, and it was purposeful - checking cows in the paddock, surveying the land, moving livestock and so on. Walking for the sole purpose of exercise was a strange notion. However, having left their farm and settled in town, these retired farmers quickly became sedentary.

John realised the size of the problem when he saw a patient drive half a block from the supermarket car park to the post office. He knew that the risks of heart disease and diabetes were high for this patient as well as many others. He wondered how he could inspire them to become more active.

Instead of telling his patients to go for a walk, John invited his patients to walk with him between 7.30am and 8.30am, a time that was most convenient to many people. After a few walking sessions, one of his patients suggested doing warm ups, which is how I got involved. I have been doing / teaching Tai Chi for many years, and was happy to help put together a few warm up and cool down exercises.

The idea for these groups then grew and grew. We started in 2004 and there are now walking groups in Trafalgar, Warragul, Drouin and Neerim South. Each group has its own flavour. For example, the vet in Trafalgar goes on paw-walks with that group (walking group members bring their dogs) and the Neerim South group meet for coffee afterwards.

All groups operate in a similar way. We start at 7.30 with warm ups, then members set off on a walk, each according to his or her own pace. At around 8 o'clock, walkers then turn back and walk towards the meeting point, where we do a few stretches, some deep breathing and cool down. We finish at 8.30. Our local doctors often join us for a walk, and head off to work after we finish.

We have a regular newsletter where we include recipes, news about local events and goings on. The doctors also write an article of two about a health issue or highlight some health information.

There are no membership fees. Our pamphlet clearly states that walkers are responsible for their own health and walk at their own risk. We receive a bit of funding from the Shire (eg. to pay costs such as breakfasts) and from the doctors to help pay for making leaflets and flyers. Our walks are held weekly, and we walk throughout the year, even when our walk falls on Good Friday or Boxing Day!

I think the success of the walking groups is based on a simple recipe. You need a leader who is committed to turning up, rain, hail or shine. This reassures (or pressures) members to turn up. Knowing that someone will be there is important, otherwise members will be discouraged or find excuses not to come. The leader also leads the warm ups and cool downs, as well as telling the group when to start walking and where to go. The leader can change of course, but it is important that there is always someone assigned to this role.

Walking is easy to do, free and a great way to socialise. Many of our walkers are retirees who have moved to town from their farm or from Melbourne. They come along to keep healthy as well as to get to know other people. Walking is an easy way to fall into conversation. We turn up to the walking group, find someone who walks at a similar pace and begin walking with them. It's an easy and enjoyable way to get to know each other.

– Chris Everett