

News

Obese people should be given free Fitbits, says health adviser

Marc Horne

Obese people should be issued with free "Fitbit" wristbands to help them to slim, a Scottish government adviser has claimed.

The devices, which count calories and monitor the number of steps walked, cost between £60 and £200 and have become a fashionable accessory among the fitness conscious.

However, Heather Morgan, of the Health Services Research Unit (HSRU), believes that doctors should be able to prescribe the wearable fitness trackers to overweight patients.

Dr Morgan, who is based at the University of Aberdeen, feels that the gadgets could ease the strain on the health service by helping to prevent chronic health problems such as diabetes, heart disease and strokes.

Scotland has long been regarded as the "sick man" of Europe.

Two out of three Scottish adults, about three million people, are either overweight or obese and providing each of them with a digital tracker would cost in the region of £180 million.

The figure is one in three for children of primary school age.

It is estimated that obesity costs Scotland about £5 billion a year in treatment costs and other measures needed to tackle it.

Dr Morgan claimed that Fitbits were being used by those who needed them least, stating: "The appeal of wearable fitness trackers, and their cost, means that current use is largely among the worried well and fitness geeks. In other words, those who want, rather than need, them."

"Obesity is strongly linked with poverty and low educational attainment so we might assume that many

Fitbits help the wearer to track their own fitness



of those at risk would not be your typical fitness tracker consumers.

"If fitness trackers were made available through health services they could have the potential to improve eating habits and increase activity for those who need encouragement the most."

The research fellow at the HSRU, which is funded by the Scottish government, pointed out that GPs are already permitted to offer free access to gym and dieting clubs to overweight patients.

She added: "The Medical Research Council provides guidance on how to develop and evaluate new strategies to improve health. However, these take time and it seems a shame that our health services are not exploiting current trends in self-tracking."

She acknowledged that some patients could have concerns about the NHS storing their data, but said: "These fears could be allayed by the simple offer of a wearable fitness tracker on the same terms as any other prescription."

Dr Morgan revealed that she has personally experienced the benefits of constantly tracking her own exercise regime.

She said: "When I'm wearing a tracker I use the stairs instead of the lift, park further away from places so I have to walk and I sit less and eat less."

"This takes effort and willpower, but, by reaching daily activity targets and measuring my progress, I have improved my body mass index. I feel healthier and I am fitter."

However, Aileen Campbell, the minister for public health and sport, claimed that the recommended 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week could be achieved by walking, gardening or even house cleaning and did not need to "cost a penny".



Tom Binns of Glasgow Piano City plays the piano placed in the foyer of Gartnavel Royal Hospital in Glasgow

for tuition on pianos located around the city through the pilot scheme, which was launched by a group of volunteers called Glasgow Piano City.

Fiona Sinclair, Gartnavel volunteer services manager, said: "You can really see the transformation. People from the intensive psychiatric care unit, who are extremely unwell and who maybe can't have a conversation with someone and have to be accompanied by staff, are less anxious after they play. The referrals [to play the piano] have been quite informal but we are now looking at how to use it and record the impact on patients more formally."

Sarah Beesley, consultant psychiatrist at Gartnavel, is among staff whose patients benefit from playing. She said: "The hub [where the foyer is] is the first place patients go for their time out, so it's really important to normalise things. Being able to play a piano there really helps to do that."

Glasgow Piano City was established in 2014 to locate the instruments in public spaces across the city to encourage more people to play. It now has about 15 pianos at venues, including Govanhill Baths, which anyone can play.

The group received £20,000 in national lottery money and now hopes to win a public vote due to close next Wednesday to net a further £3,000 from the funding body.

Tom Binns, a musician who founded the group, said: "It evolved naturally as more people heard about us, including some GPs who came to visit. Offering free lessons and access to pianos to those most in need fits in with social prescribing."

Pianos prove key to mental wellbeing

They are not the typical noises of a bustling hospital

foyer — but soothing piano sounds are helping patients to overcome a range of mental health problems (Julia Horton writes).

Pianos on Prescription offers free access to instruments and lessons in Glasgow for NHS patients with conditions including depression and dementia. Staff at

Gartnavel Royal Hospital have reported a noticeable improvement in the behaviour of patients with mental health problems who have been playing a piano installed in the hospital entrance hall.

Patients who seek help from GPs for mental health or social problems have also been referred

Council blamed for demise of Mela

Mike Wade

The board of the Edinburgh Mela has finally conceded that this year's event is likely to be cancelled but blamed the city council for its imminent demise.

Billed as Scotland's largest festival of world music and dance, the 2016 Mela has failed to secure more than £300,000 in public funding from Creative Scotland, the Scottish government's Expo fund, and the city council.

At a press conference yesterday, Shami Khan, the Mela chairman, said that he hoped to retain it as a community event but conceded: "Right now we are at a stage to call it off."

He added that, were it possible to raise £50,000, a limited version of the two-day festival could go ahead on Leith Links next month.

The board claimed that since March,

when it believed it had secured funding of £75,000 from the council, the local authority's attitude had changed.

Mr Khan said that news of a council decision a fortnight ago to withdraw funding had been received with consternation by directors.

He said: "A business plan was demanded [by the council]. The Mela board has answered questions asked and responded to demands many times to repetitive requests. In contrast, questions asked by the Mela board have remained unanswered."

A third of the Mela's 15-strong board had stepped down after the resignation in March of Chris Purnell, the event's former chief executive. His departure is the subject of an employment tribunal.

In his resignation letter, Mr Purnell said: "It is my duty and legal obligation to conduct due diligence and advise the

board of any issues of noncompliance or malpractice. It is also a condition of the Mela's funding to ensure compliance with charity regulations and best practice."

A complaint about the conduct of the board has been raised with charity regulators and police have been contacted about "financial irregularities" involving an individual.

In a joint statement, Creative Scotland and Edinburgh council said: "We have been in detailed discussions with the Mela board for several months and have sought assurances on the many challenges facing the festival."

"The information submitted does not provide confidence that the Mela board can resolve the current difficulties, and as such, the council has now reluctantly taken the decision not to release public funds to this year's festival."

Ambulance service to get 1,000 extra paramedics

Julia Horton

A thousand new paramedics are to be trained to work in the ambulance service over the next five years.

The first 200 paramedics, recruited from the ambulance technician workforce, will begin training this year, backed by £5 million of Scottish government funding.

There will be 200 new technicians recruited to replace them. Technicians, who provide pre-hospital care though the treatment and transportation of patients, are eligible for paramedic training after one year of service.

Aileen Campbell, the public health minister, said: "Investing in a professional, highly-skilled ambulance work-

force will help deliver a better service for patients across Scotland.

"The Scottish Ambulance Service provides support to communities the length and breadth of the country, not just responding to emergencies but also helping to facilitate planned and unscheduled care."

"That is why we are committing, over the next five years, to train 1,000 new paramedics equipped with the skills and abilities to support people in their local communities."

Pauline Howie, chief executive of the Scottish Ambulance Service, said: "This year we are recruiting and training over 200 new paramedics in the first phase of a five-year plan for continued investment in front line resources."