

# Not a stitch of spandex in sight

## This gym caters exclusively to the over-50 set

By Darron Kloster, Times Colonist February 4, 2009

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist, Times Colonist



### **Richard Gafter works with Isa Milman, 59, on a functional trainer for core stability at the MedEx gym.**

Your typical gym it isn't.

You won't find any loud music here.

No mirrors.

No buffed trainers.

And not a stitch of spandex in sight.

What you will find are plenty of people like Millie Shapiro, a retired school teacher and active artist, and semi-retired scientist Malcolm Clark, who are turning to exercise to recover from injuries and surgeries, fix wonky knees and hips or simply get a new grip on their health.

MedEx Fitness Centre -- the brainchild of Victoria kinesiologist and registered medical exercise program director Richard Gafter -- tailors medical-based fitness programs exclusively for the over-50 set.

Gafer claims it is Canada's first exclusive fitness centre of its kind in Canada for the demographic and those with medical conditions.

And early indications are it was a long time coming.

Opened late last fall in the heart of James Bay -- a neighbourhood that has one of Victoria's largest concentrations of seniors, MedEx already has 215 members and dozens joining every week, said Gafer. The oldest member is 95.

There are no contracts, just a flat \$65 monthly fee, and a one-time charge of \$80 to collect doctor's records to program individual workout regimens. The monthly fee is dropped to \$55 apiece if you join with a friend or family member.

"It's a wonderful place to come, very peaceful," says Shapiro, 71, who is a cancer survivor, recently had a pacemaker and is recovering from surgery to her esophagus. "This is the one thing that really keeps me going. I feel so much better after getting the right exercise. I feel refreshed."

Gafter said by working with his member's doctors and physiotherapists, his staff are able to assemble fitness sessions that directly benefit members and their particular issues, whether it be a post-surgery workout or a gentle routine to ease arthritic pain or to get in shape.

"We are very careful in the assessment to determine if people are in the acute phase of a condition, and contact their physician or health-care provider to co-ordinate our work with their treatment," said Gafter.

Gafter programs the needs of his members into tiny computer cards that can be inserted into the workout machines, which range from rowing and elliptical bikes to vibration machine and upper-body handwheels.

The cards give the user personal instruction such as how much time to spend on the station, the direction of motion their legs or arms should make and calibrate a specific resistance.

The state-of-the-art machines, manufactured in the U.S. under the brands SciFit, Keiser Institute on Aging and Concept2, are very easy to use and designed for mature clients as they are low-impact, or joint friendly, and can be operated in forward and backward motions.

Vanessa Powell, 65, has been working out at the gym for three weeks, 45 minutes a day, and says she feels better already. She has diabetes and arthritis and although she loves to walk hasn't been able to go long distances because of pain in her knees. Working out on the rowing and vibration machines have given her relief from joint pain and improved her overall health.

"It's very good for the seniors to have a place like this ... we all have some issues," says Powell.

For Nita McCann, who turns 70 next month, it isn't only the exercise, but the social aspect of the club. "I live in James Bay and it's nice to have a place to come and meet people and enjoy friends," she said. "There no pressures here. You can just come in and socialize and exercise."

Clark, 64, said his wife "made a New Year's resolution for me" to join the gym to shed some pounds. "I think it's a great idea," he said while riding the exercise bike.

"People here are all about the same age. You don't have to be embarrassed. Just drop in. I come a couple times a week and feel good about it. Most people couldn't afford this type of equipment for their home, so it's worth it."

Every customer raves about the personalized training, which is part of the membership. At most health clubs, that is an added cost of up to \$60 an hour, said Gafter.

With Canada's population aging quickly and health issues and costs skyrocketing, Gafter knows he's on to something big. The franchise opportunity is being considered, but he prefers to perfect his James Bay model before going further. Capacity at the James Bay site is about 375 members and that ceiling is being met fast.

"People over 50 have been searching for a facility geared to their fitness and rehabilitative needs," Gafter said.

"Unlike typical health clubs, we provide a high level of service and equipment in a no-pressure atmosphere ... and people are responding in a big way. They obviously want this type of facility and that demand is growing."

MedEx Fitness Centre is located in James Bay Square, between Thrifty Foods and Starbucks, at 425-455 Simcoe St. Call 250-382-5050.