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Fitness centers rehabilitate, maintain health

By LINDA HOLDERNESS

Three years ago, Ty Girard, then 55, could not walk, or speak without slurring. His right hand lay curled and useless.

When doctors recommended the stroke victim undertake an exercise program for rehabilitation, no one knew if he would ever completely recover.

But Girard, determined to walk again, worked out three or four times a week under medical supervision at The Lifestyle Center in Visalia. Today, the man who once had to be wheeled to his exercise sessions is himself a certified weight room instructor at the Lifestyle Center.

Girard, with his unflagging positive attitude, may not have been an ordinary patient, but neither is The Lifestyle Center an ordinary fitness club.

The \$6 million, 55,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art exercise facility is owned by the taxpayer-supported Kaweah Delta Health Care District, which also runs two acute-care hospitals, a rehabilitation center and a dialysis center in Central California.

What makes The Lifestyle Center unusual is that it fills two roles. It is a facility to which doctors in the district can refer patients who need physical rehabilitation, and it is also a for-profit fitness center that is open to members of the community.

Girard regained his mobility through rehabilitation at the center. Now he can continue to work out there to maintain his fitness.

The Lifestyle Center is a prime example of a growing nationwide trend — hospitals and healthcare providers are get-

ting into the fitness center business at a vigorous pace.

Nearly 320,000 people nationwide belong to hospital-owned fitness centers, generating more than \$400 million in revenues, according to the April 8 issue of Modern Healthcare.

It's a trend that so far has not hit Sacramento and is only slowly coming to California.

One suggested reason is basic: No one has shown that it would be profitable in

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California. And that may be a function of the fact that, in a state known for its outdoor lifestyle, Californians already have a high proportion of gyms and already spend a great deal of active recreation time outdoors.

"This state is one great big health facility," said Kurt Davis, a spokesman for Foundation Health Corp. in Rancho Cordova.

In the rest of the nation, however, particularly Florida, Arizona and Illinois, the number of hospital-owned fitness centers has increased more than fivefold in the past five years, according to Robin

Schuette, director of the Association of Hospital Health and Fitness, an Illinois-based organization established to support the centers.

When the organization was founded in 1991, Schuette said, it could identify only 65 hospital fitness centers nationwide. Today there are nearly 350.

Enrollment is surging, too. More than 300,000 people nationwide are members of medically affiliated gyms, and that number has been increasing by 30 percent a year since 1980.

The upward trend does not appear to be slowing: A St. Louis consultant to hospitals looking to build fitness centers currently has about 250 clients that are considering the move.

Why are hospitals and healthcare providers, traditionally purveyors of care for the sick, getting into the fitness business? One reason is the bottom line. As healthcare costs soar, providers must look for ways to cut costs and increase revenues. Creating a fit community can do both.

"The way healthcare is going," said Foundation's Davis, "hospitals are becoming more and more interested in attracting healthy people because more and more of the payments that hospital providers receive are on a capitated basis, meaning they are getting paid per member per month, whether these people enter the hospital or not."

In some cases, in the right marketplace and with careful planning, hospital fitness gyms can be highly profitable, Schuette said.

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Study: People's lives depend on getting proper exercise

Continued from preceding page

The \$16 million Michigan Athletic Club, a 175,000-square-foot center near Michigan State University's campus in East Lansing, forecasts revenues of \$5.7 million this year, with a profit margin of 15 percent.

The tax-support Lifestyle Center, on the other hand, just about breaks even.

Kaweah Delta got into the gym business, said marketing director Carolyn Chamberlin, "because we saw in the future of healthcare the need to keep people well and healthy and out of the hospital. Evidence is mounting that exercise is one of the most effective ways to do that.

In July — to coincide with the Olympics — the surgeon general's office is expected to release a document confirming that conclusion.

In its "Report on Physical Activity and Health," the surgeon general's office, along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, warns that lack of exercise may be a direct cause of most major diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, arthritis, diabetes, obesity and even depression.

That report, reminiscent of the 1964 report on the hazards of smoking, is expected by many healthcare profession-

als to change the way people take care of themselves.

No longer will they exercise just to have fun or look good. They will exercise because they know their lives literally depend on it.

The evidence is overwhelming, said Philip Leake, exercise physiologist and director of the Preventive Health Center for Mercy Healthcare in Sacramento.

"When you factor out everything else, exercise not only increases the quality of life but increases the longevity of life," Leake said.

It's only natural, say Schuette and others, that hospitals should expand their

business to include fitness.

"Hospitals should be in the business of health," Schuette said, "not in the business of sickness."

That's the dual mission of the coming hospital fitness industry. Keeping people well is good for them and good for the hospital business, and hospitals think that fitness centers can do both.

The centers offer people the exercise they need to prevent illness and to reduce the impact those illnesses have on the healthcare system, meanwhile adding a new revenue stream to shrinking healthcare budgets.

Kaweah Delta refers to its Lifestyle Center as a "wellness center," according to Chamberlin.

Unlike most commercial gyms, enrollees of the center must undergo a medical evaluation and risk assessment before they can begin working out and they are monitored throughout their

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Hospital Health and Fitness Assn.

membership.

"It's not like you walk in the door and start pumping iron," Chamberlin said.

Despite its hospital affiliation, The Lifestyle Center would be the envy of many commercial clubs.

Although medical rehabilitation is an important part of the center's activities,

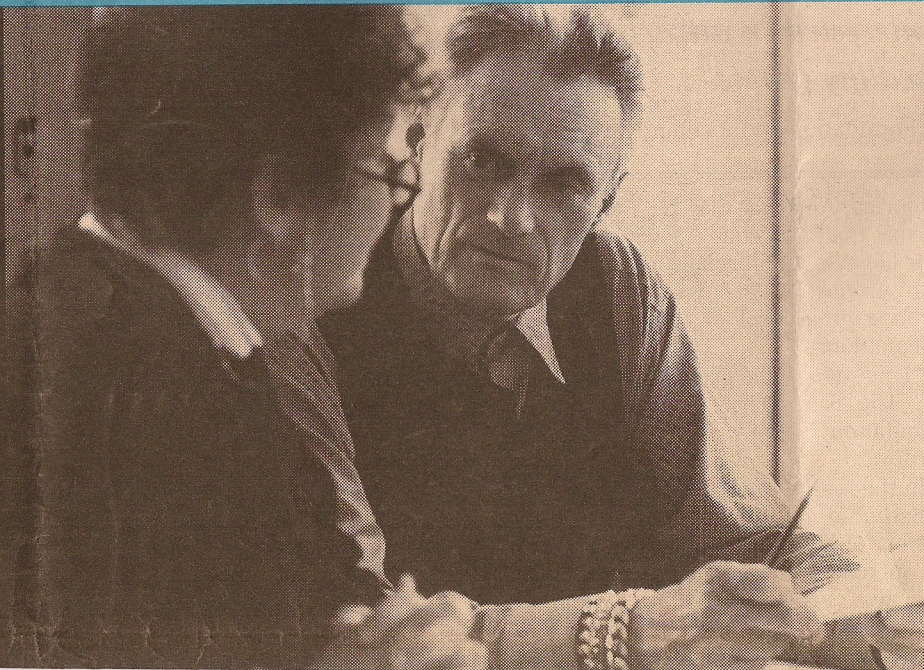
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many commercial clubs.

Although medical rehabilitation is an important part of the center's activities, its 6,800 members — more than half of them seniors — can play basketball, lift weights, work out on exercise machines, walk or jog on indoor and outdoor tracks, swim in one of two pools or enroll in aerobics classes. The center also has day care, a cafe and meeting rooms for public use.

Sutter Health's PregnaGym isn't quite that fancy, but for the past 10 years it has been offering expectant and new mothers a place to work out.

It is the only hospital-owned fitness center in the Sacramento area and the only gym for pregnant women in Northern California. Any pregnant woman who has her obstetrician's permission is allowed to join.

The center, at Fair Oaks Boulevard and Howe Avenue, medically evaluates each member and devises an individual workout program for her. In addition, some of the equipment in the gym has been especially designed for pregnant women.

Since the gym opened, more than 5,000 women have joined, said Mary Aschukian, founder and director of the center. Sutter subsidizes the monthly dues.

Working out at the PregnaGym, Aschukian said, gives pregnant women both health and comfort advantages. Generally, pregnant women who work out have healthier pregnancies and easier deliveries. The gym also offers pregnant women a supportive environment in which to exercise while their bodies are changing.

For Sutter, the gym not only creates healthier patients, but gives women positive exposure to the Sutter healthcare system, Aschukian said.

Kaiser Permanente in Northern California is also encouraging physical activity with its new K-Plus Fitness Program, a joint effort of the health maintenance organization and 37 fitness clubs. This program offers Kaiser members reduced initiation fees and lower monthly dues at the contract clubs.

More than 11,000 Kaiser members have signed up for the new healthcare program.

Kaiser's involvement doesn't end with the sign-ups. The HMO carefully selects the clubs it contracts with and provides staff for fitness analysis and monitoring.

It also uses the clubs as miniature neighborhood centers, offering health education programs, such as parenting classes and post-mastectomy groups that are open to both Kaiser members and non-members.

The response to the program has been encouraging, its proponents say. Cynthia Sotelo is member services coordinator for the YMCA in downtown Sacramento, one of the fitness clubs that has affiliated with Kaiser. That affiliation has increased the organization's membership, Sotelo said.

The same is true at The Del Norte

the organization's membership, Sotelo said.

The same is true at The Del Norte Club in the north area, said Jinger Snapp, its marketing and sales manager. In the month after Kaiser opened the affiliation program, she said, the majority of new sign-ups to the club were Kaiser members.

Foundation is watching closely the progress of its new fitness program for senior citizens in Tucson, Ariz., which started in January.

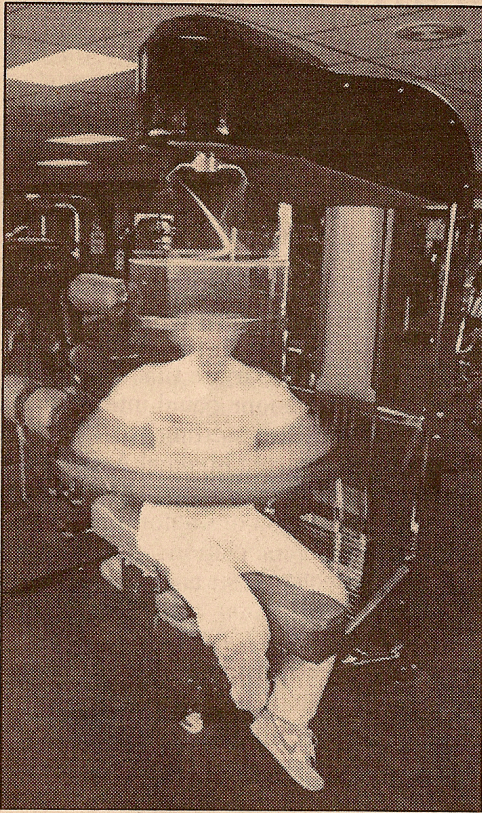
Under SeniorCare, a Medicare risk program, member seniors receive free membership in local fitness centers. The health plan also provides free transportation to the centers.

Intergroup, Foundation's HMO in Arizona, is the first health maintenance organization in that state, and one of the first in the country, to offer a free health club membership, said Thomas Lescault, Foundation's vice president for government programs.

Although it's too soon to judge the results, he said, in the first three months the plan was offered, 5 percent of the eligible membership signed up. That's a promising number, Lescault added.

Even better, the new enrollees are averaging about 3.5 workouts a week.

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File photo

And every month since April, Lescault said, SeniorCare has been the fastest-growing Medicare risk plan in Arizona. Those statistics are compiled and kept by the Health Care Financing Administration.

"We have had people switch health plans just to get the free fitness component," said Intergroup spokeswoman Donna Kreutz.

The HMO sets certain criteria fitness clubs must meet in order to contract with them. For seniors under a doctor's care, for example, advisers at each club must monitor the patients' workouts, keep track of their progress and stay in touch with their physicians.

After the first year, Lescault said, the company will research the demographics

and determine how much "from a dollars and cents standpoint" was gained from offering this benefit.

And, more importantly, he said, the company will determine how much healthier the members were who took advantage of the program.

"We've done our (initial) research," he added. "We believe it's a good investment. ... It really seems to match the needs in the marketplace."

If getting and staying fit is the trend of the future, getting fit specifically at hospital gyms may become an even stronger trend.

When the Kaweah Delta's Lifestyle Center moved to its new facility in March, the response, said Jane Presnell, center director, was phenomenal. Enrollment

has already more than doubled and is near the new center's 7,000-member capacity.

Hospital fitness centers have a lot to offer, Presnell said.

"A wellness center that's associated with a hospital is a bit more credible than a fitness center," she said. "Our staff is all trained and certified ... and usually hospital facilities have more staff per member. We need to make money, but the emphasis isn't only on the dollars."

The emphasis is on keeping people well so they can enjoy fuller lives and live longer. It's on helping people like Girard work slowly and painfully to recover his strength and get up out of his wheelchair and walk — and then keep on working out.

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