



Chris Ellis

Golfing for Doctors

Recent research in the Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports has shown that the death rate for golfers is 40 percent lower than other people, which corresponds to a 5 year increase in life expectancy. The golfers with the lowest handicaps are the safest. I am not so sure about this. I am certain that most golfers feel the opposite: that the stress of the game must surely shorten one's life not lengthen it. The British journalist A A Gill described golf as "a game of ceaseless torment, with brief flashes of possible contentment that are cruel illusions".

I suspect this sort of research is one of those multifactorial issues like the debates around HRT in menopausal women. A selected group of people such as golfers and middle aged women, who can afford a set of Ping irons or afford HRTs, have many underlying confounding factors.

All my life I have attempted golf. It is not a game you play, it is a game you attempt. I recently decided to get a new set of irons to replace my 1960s model Dunlop set, which have serrated edges from being hit against sundry trees and rocks. I approached our local professional about this purchase. He is a young, very serious Scotsman who watched me swing my clubs and after a while stood back and said "do you know what is the matter with your swing, Doctor?". "The problem, Doctor, is that you have a power leakage".

It was not the sort of response I was expecting. I was about to tell him that, at my age, there was the possibility of several other sorts of leakage when he said that if I followed through with my wrists all would be restored to its former glory.

Doctors have always traditionally played golf on Wednesday afternoons. We have in our fourball a very eager beaver anaesthetist, who tends to tack like a sailing boat from the rough on one side of the fairway to the rough on the other side. If you didn't know that he was playing golf you might think that his shots out of the rough were actually someone trying to beat a snake to death. We played on a course in the lowveld once and on this course was a long par 3 hole over a lake. On this occasion our anaesthetist hit the only good shot straight over the water onto the green while the rest of us either bombed the water or sprayed the undergrowth on either side of the green. When we eventually arrived on the green our anaesthetist was hopping up and down with the anticipation of a birdie two. In his eagerness he wacked his ball past the hole and it trickled into the bunker just next to the back of the green. Deflated but not defeated he strode into the bunker and exploded it out of the sand. The ball rose majestically into the air as it flew over our heads and plopped emphatically into the lake. He was on the green for one and in the lake for three. I am not sure that a game that can do this to you can give you an increase in life expectancy of five years.

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