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Bunn, C. (2017) Fitness for fans: professional football and public health. *Football Medicine and Scientist* (20), pp. 34-35.

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Deposited on: 3 April 2017

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Fitness for Fans: professional football and public health

By Dr Christopher Bunn, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, on behalf of BASEM/FSEM

The benefits of an active life – such as improved mental health and lowered risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers – are well known amongst sports and exercise medicine professionals. But in the broader population, not everyone is able to realise these benefits. As part of this year's joint BASEM/FSEM conference in Liverpool, delegates had a lively discussion about how professional football (and other sporting) clubs can help to get the population moving more.

The session began with Dr Justin Varney from Public Health England. Justin presented the current picture of physical activity levels in England drawn from 'Everybody active, every day', which reported that:

- 33% of men and 45% of women are not active enough for good health
- only 21% of boys and 16% of girls aged 5-15 achieve recommended levels of physical activity
- inactivity levels are highest in children in the lowest economic group
- walking trips decreased by 30% between 1995 and 2013
- 64% of trips are made by car, 22% are made on foot and 2% are made by bike¹

He then set out a variety of ways in which the UK Government has committed to tackle the problems of inactive and sedentary lifestyles and pointed us all to 'Sporting Future', which is the first new national strategy for sport in more than a decade². The strategy includes a commitment to invest in locally-delivered physical activity programs and is not just focussed on professional sport. Professional Football Club's Community Trusts and Foundations have known the power of their brand for a long time. All over the UK they are already making a contribution to the fitness of the population.

One significant contribution has come from Football Fans in Training (FFIT). FFIT is a weight loss and healthy living programme for overweight and obese men that was developed in Scotland by a team of academics led by the University of Glasgow, in collaboration with the Scottish Professional Football League Trust (SPFLT). FFIT is a 12-week programme delivered at the stadia of professional football clubs. The programme is informed by sociological understandings of masculinity and evidence on what works for behaviour change. As they attend each week participants are taught a range of new skills and techniques in a mixture of discussion-led learning and physical activity. Participants are also given a pedometer and pursue an evidence-based walking programme that starts with a baseline assessment and allows them to self-monitor their progress each week.

FFIT was evaluated in a randomised controlled trial (RCT) funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The RCT found that 12 months from baseline, men who participated in

¹ Public Health England (2014). *Everybody active, every day*. London: Public Health England.

² HM Government (2015). *Sporting Future*. London: HM Government

FFIT lost an average of 4.94 kg more than those who had to wait 1 year before being offered the programme. Amongst the many other positive outcomes, FFIT participants also reported higher levels of physical activity than those on the waiting list³. The findings from this study are very promising and have encouraged the Scottish Government to continue to fund the SPFLT to run FFIT in Scotland, where during the 2014/15 season, 1125 participated in the programme. Further afield, the SPFLT have been working with the Bundesliga in Germany, and have also trained clubs from the English leagues to deliver FFIT.

Since developing FFIT, the team I am a member of at the University of Glasgow have begun to focus in more depth on how to help people improve their physical activity levels and reduce the time they spend being sedentary. Through a collaboration with academic colleagues in the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal, the European Healthy Stadia Network and PAL Technologies, we have developed European Fans in Training (EuroFIT). EuroFIT, like FFIT, is a 12-week programme designed to be delivered by professional football clubs at their stadia. It introduces a novel device (the SitFIT™) which provides real-time feedback on physical activity levels and time spent sedentary. The programme also incorporates an app-based game to encourage social support ('MatchFIT') and is grounded in a more extensive range of theory and evidence, drawn from across the EuroFIT consortium⁴.

The EuroFIT programme is currently being evaluated in all four participating countries as part of a RCT. Once completed, the study will provide objective evidence of the programme's impact on sedentary time and physical activity (as well as a range of secondary outcomes) and will deepen the knowledge and evidence base that is building for channelling health improvement efforts through football and other sporting clubs.

To finish where we began: the benefits of an active life. Taking a sustained walk can protect memory, reduce risk of stroke, diabetes and heart disease, improve mood, and prevent obesity. If we are to help others realise these benefits, we will need to follow the advice Dr. Andrew Murray gave our conference room in Liverpool: spread the word, think walking (and take action), work across sectors and be active ourselves. Football clubs can deliver on all four of these.

³ Hunt, K., Wyke, S., Gray, C.M. et al. (2014) A gender-sensitised weight loss and healthy living programme for overweight and obese men delivered by Scottish Premier League football clubs (FFIT): a pragmatic randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet*, 383, 9924, 1211–21.

⁴ van Nassau, F. et al. (2016) Study protocol of European Fans in Training (EuroFIT): a four-country randomised controlled trial of a lifestyle program for men delivered in elite football clubs. *BMC Public Health*, 16, 598.