

Dr. Kenneth Cooper

Wellness As A Way Of Life

By Edward Pittman

He is known as “the father of aerobics,” and when Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper, M.D., M.P.H., tells the story of his remarkable achievements he says they were the result of divine intervention.

In the early 1960s Dr. Cooper was in the U.S. Air Force, using an exercise program he says was totally ineffective. After earning his doctorate in exercise physiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, Dr. Cooper says he realized that no one knew how to use exercise in the practice of medicine. He says he then began to see exercise as a powerful antibiotic, with everyone needing a different prescription.

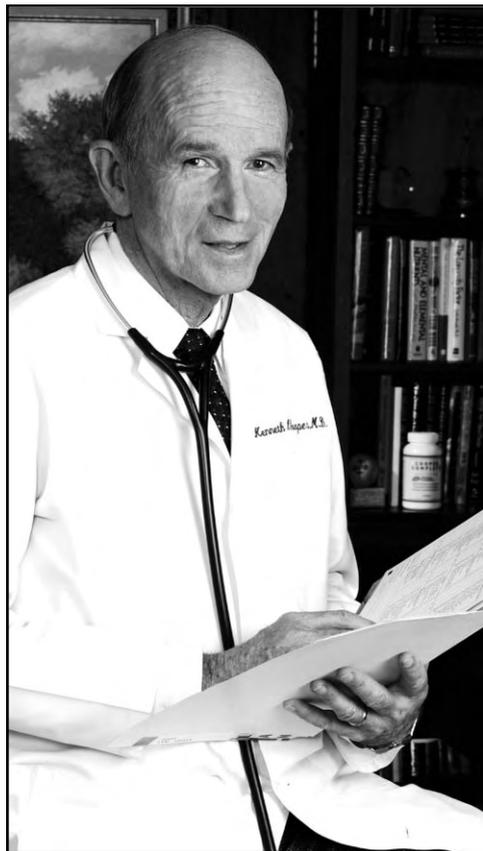
Dr. Cooper developed his first aerobics program for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) astronaut program, employing a point system based on the intensity and duration of exercise. After more than 27,000 persons at five Air Force bases were funneled through the program, Dr. Cooper decided that it should be shared with the American people.

In 1966 he partnered with Kenneth Brown to write the seminal article, “Exercise the Astronaut’s Way.” The article was so successful that Dr. Cooper was bombarded with offers from book publishers, and one year later *Aerobics* was a bestseller. Today *Aerobics* (Bantam, 1968), among 18 books by Dr. Cooper, is published in 41 languages, including braille.

After 13 years in the Air Force, Dr. Cooper was promoted to full colonel, offered command of a small hospital, and asked to leave his research behind.

“I couldn’t see doing that, so at age 40 I walked away,” he says.

What followed spawned an entire



industry and changed the lives of millions of people. Today the Cooper Aerobics Center has a full membership, and the business that began with two employees now occupies a 30-acre estate with 538 employees and requires a \$50 million budget.

There’s more: During the past 34 years the clinic has treated some 80,000 patients; the tremendous quantity of research has led to the publication of more than 600 papers; Dr. Cooper’s work with Frito-Lay led to the elimination of trans fats from its chip products; the clinic trains more than 6,500 fitness professionals annually; a weekly syndicated radio program reaches 30 stations nationwide; and consulting arm, Cooper Ventures, operates and manages fitness facilities for numerous corporate clients.

Residents of the United States have benefited greatly from Dr. Cooper’s success by adopting his wellness principles. From 1968 to 1990, Americans have enjoyed a 48

percent reduction in deaths from heart attacks and a six-year increase in longevity — two thirds of that due to changes in lifestyle. The components of a complete wellness program are proper weight, controlled alcohol intake, eliminating habit-forming drugs, stress management and a periodic wellness examination.

Dr. Cooper blasts common myths about aging, especially the myth that seniors cannot exercise vigorously without risking a heart attack. He says fitness declines not because people grow older, but because they exercise less as they age.

“We see people up to 90 years of age performing like they are 20 and 30 years younger,” says Dr. Cooper. “It requires persistence, continuity and discipline. One word that can create success — professionally or personally — is discipline.”

Dr. Cooper says the first step is to engage in 30 minutes of activity on most days. The next step is accruing 15 aerobic points per week, which would reduce deaths from heart attacks, strokes, diabetes and cancer by 58 percent, and could potentially prolong life up to six years. That translates to a walk of two miles in 30 minutes three times per week. If that’s too fast, Dr. Cooper says walking two miles in 45 minutes four times a week (or two miles in 40 minutes five times a week) will achieve the same results. And strength training becomes more important as we age. his formula calls for an aerobic-activity/muscle-building ratio of 60/40 at age 50, 55/45 at age 60 and 50/50 by age 70. “We have proven that it is cheaper and more effective to maintain good health than to regain it once it is lost,” says Dr. Cooper.

Dr. Cooper says that exercise is

for everyone—even the disabled and infirm. “We have paraplegics who participate in our wheelchair tennis league,” he says. “I have a blind patient who has run 150 marathons. I have seen effective fitness programs in nursing homes that involve calisthenics done in a chair or where participants use elastic bands. Where there’s a will there’s a way,”

Dr. Cooper says that after creating fitness programs in assisted living centers he has seen advanced Alzheimer’s patients benefit from exercise. “The most elderly people would get there 30 minutes early to make sure they got into class,” he adds.

Everyday the 73-year-old Dr. Cooper practices what he preaches. His personal exercise program includes snow skiing, water skiing and mountain climbing, as well as aerobic conditioning and strength training. “Last night I walked and ran two miles, averaging about 12 minutes a mile,” he says. “I finished with 20 minutes of weight training.”

Dr. Cooper is quick to credit a higher power for his success. “When I left the U.S. Air Force I had a financial statement of less than \$25,000,” he says. “I had a pregnant wife, no insurance, a five-year-old daughter and had just moved from San Antonio to Dallas with no place to work or live. The odds that I would be successful were 1,000 to one. I’m convinced there has been a lot of divine intervention in my life.”

Another defining moment was testifying before a crowd of 240,000 during a Rev. Billy Graham revival crusade in Brazil. “That changed my whole future,” says Dr. Cooper. “After that I knew who was in charge around here. My vision was finite, but the Lord’s vision was infinite.”