Staying Fit, Strong and Mobile in Later Life

RIA Welcomes New Schlegel Research Chair in Mobility and Aging

Written by Kristian Partington

When an older adult falls it can result in a bone fracture, impacting many aspects of their life. The latest Schlegel Research Chair to join the RIA team will focus on preventing such fractures, and supporting recovery when they do happen, with the most basic of tools available: exercise.

Dr. Lora Giangregorio’s research examines how we can improve mobility and reduce fracture risk, with a special focus on physical activity and exercise. She joins the team as Schlegel Research Chair in Mobility and Aging, and offered her first public lecture in her new role at the Centre of Excellence for Innovation in Aging on Sept. 13.

Titled Staying Fit, Strong and Mobile in Later Life, the seminar explained that although every person will experience some decline in gait and mobility as they age, research suggests they can reduce falls, prevent

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muscle and bone loss, and remain fit by setting reachable goals in a regular exercise regimen.

Dr. Giangregorio shared the example of “The Iron Nun,” who began running in her late 40s at the suggestion of a priest who thought the time might be good for reflection. Now at 86, she has completed 360 triathlons, 45 Ironman competitions and is the oldest person to ever finish an Ironman Triathlon in less than 17 hours. Dr. Giangregorio also spoke of Yuichiro Miura, the oldest man to reach the summit of Mount Everest, who said simply that to achieve any goal, “you need a target, however big or small, and to build your health and fitness toward it.”

However, her seminar wasn’t suggesting people must run a triathlon or scale the tallest of mountains to maintain their health; only that goals and plans are a key component of progress.

“Have a goal for yourself and a plan,” Dr. Giangregorio says. “That goal could be related to an activity you want to eventually be able to do.”

“What is a new challenge that you’re going to set up for yourself?” she asked audience members. It might be an ultra-marathon or it could be as simple as being able to walk for 10 minutes without getting out of breath. Some of Dr. Giangregorio’s research focuses on evaluating exercise programs, and helping older people and health care providers use the research findings in the real world. Regardless of what research targets she and her team set, translating the findings in a tangible, meaningful way to benefit others is a key priority.

“If we’re trying to actually get research to practice then our research has to be person-centred from the start,” says Dr. Giangregorio. “We need to ask research questions that are important to older adults and health care providers in our research.”

She joins a team of eight other Schlegel Chairs who share the same person-centred philosophy, and her work will be a direct complement to the wide range of research projects currently underway at RIA.