

# EXERCISE FOR EVERYONE

## The ever-expanding reach of our Exercise Medicine Program

**THREE YEARS AGO**, the Labatt Family Heart Centre's brand new Exercise Medicine Program saw about 40 patients, mostly cardiac. In the second year, it was 100 patients, including kids with cancers and other complex disorders. Today, program founder Dr. Barbara Cifra and a team of two, treat more than 200 patients from an ever-widening range of clinical departments, like respiratory medicine, gastroenterology, rheumatology, haematology and endocrinology. Word has spread about the benefits of the program, and doctors across SickKids are sending their patients to Dr. Cifra.

As it's expanded, the program hasn't changed much. It remains a highly personalized home-based exercise program. Dr. Cifra likens it to a prescription, but one that's fun and whose benefits bleed into all aspects of life: physical health, confidence, emotional well-being and, perhaps most importantly, the feeling

that patients are not limited by their disease. Recently compiled program data showed what Dr. Cifra had always observed: after a few months in the program, patients' quality-of-life perception lifted dramatically. Yes, there were physical gains, but the most striking ones were psychosocial. This perception change happened also among patients' parents, which, for Dr. Cifra was a key finding. "Parent overprotection is one of the main limiting factors for complex patients," she says. "This program is really a family experience."

During COVID-19 social restrictions, Dr. Cifra and her team comfortably carried on virtually. Much of the program has always been administered online, after an initial in-person assessment and interview. For Dr. Cifra, virtual visits feel more intimate. "I like to observe the dynamic with their family and see how comfortable the kids are," she says.

It's these keen observations and personalization that make the program so unique and effective. Dr. Cifra tailors her exercise prescriptions not only to a patient's physical abilities and disease restrictions, but to their temperaments, interests, proximity to facilities, and family's means. A prescription could be a modified Cross-Fit program for an eager child with gym access, or a daily 10-minute walk to ease in a reluctant family with limited resources. Follow-up is regular and extensive. "I want to empower these kids to go and live life to their maximum capacity, Medicine is not treating just their medical condition. We have to start looking at these kids as a life developing. Their medical status might be well controlled, but how are they doing in the rest of their life?"

Thank you Hope for Hearts donors for your continuous support, which got the program off the ground and to where it is today.

**"I WANT TO EMPOWER THESE KIDS TO GO AND LIVE LIFE TO THEIR MAXIMUM."**

**- DR. CIFRA**



Francine: an Exercise Medicine patient who found her groove with taekwondo.

