

## Website watch

### **www.womenshealthfoundation.org**

The Women's Health Foundation (WHF) claims to be a non-profit making US organization that was set up by Missy (Melissa) Lavender. Missy found that she was left with long-term incontinence after the birth of her first child. Surgery was only partly successful, and so she started to research the topic and look for further help. When she found that there was little easily accessible help and poor funding for research, she set about trying to improve things. The mission statement of the organization is: 'To improve the pelvic health and fitness of all women.' This is a very worthy declaration, but although there is some excellent information on this website and it's presented in a very accessible manner with a nice light touch in places, I couldn't get away from the fact that, much of the time, it was trying to sell me something.

The board of directors of the WHF is impressive, including many medical doctors involved in urogynaecology and research, fitness specialists, and two physiotherapists. The first of these is Judith Florendo from Chicago, IL, who is also on the Vulvar Pain Task Force of the American Physical Therapy Association Section on Women's Health, and the second is Holly Herman, who seems to have an impressive background in training, and the treatment of urological, gynaecological, obstetric, colorectal and sexual function problems. Kari Bø and Diane Lee sit on the advisory council, so the WHF does seem to be well supported from the physiotherapy perspective.

Missy developed her programme after talking to many women about their pelvic health and fitness, and after researching health and exercise for the pelvic floor. She consulted and collaborated with medical specialists, physiotherapists and personal trainers. The programme she has devised is called Total Control, and its motto is 'be fit, be sexy, be in control'! This is supposed to be more than an exercise programme, and the site claims that it will help to build up the strength of the pelvic muscles and improve pelvic function. Total Control includes dietary advice and information to enable women to gain control over their own bodies and lives.

The layout of the website is good and it is easy to use, with very clear links to information and advice. I particularly liked the little box entitled 'Tilley's Tips' at the side of each page that shows a woman running. This keeps changing, providing little nuggets of advice on the pelvic floor, bladder training and management. Whilst I was researching this article, I saw several different tips, including:

- 'always go once at night before bedtime';
- 'athletes need a stronger pelvic floor';
- 'never indulge in "just in case" peeing';
- 'some people go every chance they get even when they don't need to';
- 'the muscles you can't see are often more important than the ones you can'; and one I particularly liked,
- 'remember what you do today will impact on what you are able to do tomorrow'.

The menu on the home page includes the heading 'Pelvic Health and Fitness'. Within this are subheadings for types of incontinence, treatments, prevention, birth strategies and finding help. There is a good concise piece with clear diagrams on why the pelvic floor is important and what it is. I felt that some diagrams would have been even clearer for the layperson if these had been labelled with the direction of the view (e.g. pelvic floor from beneath).

Two very pertinent points are made on the site:

- individuals have incontinence, but whole families suffer (because of the lifestyle changes that the person has to make to enable them to cope); and
- 80% of people can cure their own problem if they know how to and really want to tackle it.

There is a link entitled 'Try these exercises' that brings up a video of the founder, and various medical practitioners and incontinence sufferers talking about the training programme, along with very brief clips of people on mats doing the movements. However, it is possible to access samples of classes with views of participants performing mat and gym ball exercises, some using the special equipment (a 10-mL

Thera-Band and a 6-inch soft plastic ball). The exercises are described as being for the 'Pelvic Pyramid', otherwise known as the levator ani, multifidus and transversus abdominis. Once again, there are good diagrams of the muscles. It is difficult to judge the exercises when only brief clips can be seen on the website, but these did seem very much like Pilates given another name!

It is recommended that the 60-min-long programme is practised twice a week, and I think that commitment is the key here. Certainly, anyone who has purchased the DVD for \$19.95, plus the ball, the Thera-Band and the book, along with the little bag to store them all in (\$49.95 in total), will probably be committed to the exercises, at least initially. As we know only too well from our own patients, the novelty can wear off!

The section on types of incontinence contains a useful chart to help differentiate the symptoms of stress incontinence and overactive bladder, and it also describes the symptoms of overflow incontinence and anal incontinence well. 'When the bladder says GO even though you say NO' is a nice description of the overactive bladder. Treatment options are clearly set out along with tests that may be done and there is a link to dietary recommendations. This has the usual advice about caffeine and drinking sufficient water, but I was rather surprised by the foods that are described as bladder friendly! These include olive oil, garlic, onions, grapefruit, bread, cauliflower and mushrooms. Is this research-based?

A further link entitled 'Good Potty Habits' leads to a useful section on bladder training containing excellent advice and tips. I was again surprised by what was described as your 'Pee Button', which is a spot allegedly located on the low back, just above the buttocks. Apparently, if tickled, this may precipitate further flow when you feel that you have emptied your bladder fully! I can only assume that this is perhaps an acupuncture point, but I can't find mine!

The section on birth strategies is really about the effects of tears and episiotomies on the perineum. One interesting point that is made is that a 500-lb polar bear delivers a smaller baby than a 100-lb woman, which does rather put things into context. I liked the description of the effect on the bladder of the ever-growing uterus during pregnancy: it is compared to a person in a lift being steadily squashed into one corner by other people getting in. There is some useful postnatal advice, and good explanations of the

effects of the increase in progesterone and the decrease in oestrogen that continues postpartum. Giving birth is likened to doing the Boston marathon, and the site recommends resting and regaining your strength in the same way that you would after a race, but it is unclear whether the advice to start exercising again after 2 months refers to general exercise or specifically to the pelvic floor. I don't think any of us would recommend a 2-month rest for the pelvic floor, even after the hardest of deliveries! And what new mother can rest with her legs elevated and ice her perineum for 10 min every half hour for the first 2 days after birth? The National Health Service doesn't allow for that, to be sure!

The remaining sections on the WHF website are about finding help in the USA, and contain some educational and research links, although these are sparse. The press releases are solely concerned with the Total Control programme.

My verdict on this website is that it is useful, and that it holds some useful information that is presented in a chatty, accessible and sometimes light-hearted way, but the Total Control programme appears to be Pilates repackaged in order to make someone some money. This revenue does not appear to go towards sponsoring any research related to women's health other than the WHF's own programme – and there are numerous ways offered to donate to the Foundation besides buying their products!

### **[www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)**

There are many websites that are specifically designed to give women information about the menopause, and its symptoms, treatment and general management. Some are better than others, but this one fulfils its mission statement. Menopause Matters states that it is an independent, clinician-led site that aims to provide easily accessible and up-to-date information about the menopause, menopausal symptoms and treatment options so that women and health professionals can make informed choices. It was founded by a group of senior obstetricians and gynaecologists, general practitioners and research fellows in Scotland. The site recommends that management should encompass a holistic approach, including lifestyle and dietary factors, as well as both hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and non-hormonally based approaches.

The home page is well set out and the site is easily navigated. It provides information about

the quarterly magazine that Menopause Matters publishes, and there is a link to allow readers to subscribe by either post or e-mail. *Menopause Matters* magazine costs £15.00 for four issues (with a free back issue included too) and seems to be good value at 32 pages. There is also an advertisement for a book called *Menopause – Answers at Your Fingertips* by Dr Heather Currie, one of the founders of the website, which was commended by the BMA Medical Book Competition 2007. A poster and leaflets about the organization can be downloaded as PDF files, and printed out for waiting rooms and noticeboards.

The menu at the top of the home page leads to sections where you can download 10 different PDF leaflets. These are really good quality and include comprehensive information on such topics as dual energy X-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) scans and osteoporosis, what the menopause is, and alternatives to HRT. Titles include *After the Menopause*, *Love Hurts* and *HRT and You*. There is a section listing a good range of books that has links allowing you to buy some of these from the site or from Amazon. A podcast section has listen-again facilities for various programmes that have featured articles on the menopause and related topics, mainly from BBC Radio 4 programmes such as *Woman's Hour* and *Case Notes*. Sadly the 'Events' section was empty when I researched this article. The section on 'Questionnaires' contains examples that have been developed to get feedback on what information is really required by women using the site in order to ensure that these topics are covered. The results of previous questionnaires can also be viewed.

The 'Find a Clinic' section is a really useful resource with a map-based search facility that brings up information about what is provided and how a woman can access a clinic. A shop

section allows customers to purchase menopause-friendly sleepwear and bedding, dietary supplements useful for the menopause, and information DVDs.

A further menu on the left-hand side of the home page leads to dropdown menus on the menopause, osteoporosis, HRT, treatment options, heart disease, alternative therapies, the role of testosterone and period problems, amongst other useful topics. One section I particularly liked and thought very useful both to women and to health professionals was the Decision Tree. This partially interactive flow chart is designed to facilitate treatment and management decisions. There is also a useful section on frequently asked questions and an interactive forum. A login is required in order to participate, but topics and discussions can be read without doing so. Personally, I am not a huge fan of interactive forums of this kind, but recognize that some people find these very helpful. However, I did enjoy some of the jokes on the humour noticeboard!

The 'Health Professionals' section requires registration by application for a username and password. There is a section listing all the sponsors of the site, with links to their organizations for more details.

I found this to be a useful, helpful and well-researched website, and would recommend it to any of my patients and colleagues who were seeking clear, research-based information on the menopause and related topics.

I am always grateful for any information about websites that you have found useful or wish other members to know about. Please contact me at my new e-mail address (jenny.kinahan@hotmail.co.uk). Thank you.

**Jenny Kinahan**