

Race To Raise Awareness About Obesity, GI Disorders Is Under Way

Gutrunners Offers an Opportunity To Promote Digestive Health Through Running

BY MONICA J. SMITH

On a typically humid New Orleans morning last spring, under an overcast sky, about 140 runners and walkers turned out in beautiful Audubon Park for the inaugural Gutrunners Digestive Disease Week (DDW) 5K Race/1-Mile Walk. Gutrunners founder, Robynne Chutkan, MD, hopes it will become an annual tradition.

“My goal is for people to look back and not remember a time when there wasn’t a DDW race,” said Dr. Chutkan, associate professor of medicine at Georgetown University School of Medicine, in Washington, D.C.

Her vision for Gutrunners, a charitable organization sponsored by the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE), however, is a bit loftier than an annual DDW race. Dr. Chutkan hopes Gutrunners will do for digestive diseases what Team In Training (TNT) has done for leukemia and lymphoma: raise money for research, education and resources. To date, TNT has raised more than \$1 billion through 420,000 participants.

Gutrunners also sponsored a 5K Race/1-Mile Walk in association with the American College of Gastroenterology annual meeting held in San Antonio last October and was an official charity partner of the 2010 Marine Corps Marathon held in Washington, D.C., also last October. “I thought, this is a great way to fundraise for a nonprofit and to

really get people engaged,” Dr. Chutkan said.

A Charitable Experience

Dr. Chutkan’s experience in endurance training in association with charitable organizations dates back to the late 1990s when she set her sights on completing the 1998 Marine Corps Marathon. Despite having an athletic background as a dancer and squash player, Dr. Chutkan thought she might need a bit of help training for the marathon, an event that had been calling her name for a long time.

“I don’t have much natural running ability, but I’d always had the longing to do it,” she said. “Running 26.2 miles seems like such an accomplishment, but it seemed so out of reach.”

To help her work toward her goal, she joined up with a charity team to raise money for AIDS.

“I thought it would be good to have some training and guidance, and also that if I was going to put myself through this, it would be good to have a philanthropic component to it—to raise money for a cause.”

People race through charitable organizations for any number of reasons. For some, there are practical reasons—a way to get into a race that may have no openings left for the general public, or access to a coach and a training program in exchange for fundraising pledges. On a more spiritual level, there is the element of sacrifice for a purpose.

“Participants often see themselves as a

proxy for the cause,” Dr. Chutkan said. “That is, they are the healthy participant running as a proxy for the sick patient or person with a chronic disease who is too ill to run.”

After her experience as a charitable team participant, Dr. Chutkan was inspired to become a charitable team organizer. In 2000, she collaborated with one of her inflammatory bowel disease nurses, Marsha Johnson, to raise money for the Crohn’s & Colitis Foundation of America by assembling a team to complete the Marine Corps Marathon. “We got 25 people, and raised \$50,000,” she said.

ASGE Involvement

When Dr. Chutkan joined the board of the ASGE in 2006, she suggested that they do something similar—train people for marathons to raise money for colorectal cancer (CRC) and obesity research.

“I really feel strongly about obesity,” she said. “I noticed gastroenterologists weren’t really claiming obesity. The cardiologists were all over obesity, but most people are obese because they’re putting too much of the wrong things in their GI tract, and the GI tract is our domain.”

Why this oversight?

“As gastroenterologists, we have little or no formal nutritional training. We’re very focused on high-tech procedures, which are great, but I thought if people eat better and exercise more, that’s going to do more for them in the long run

than a colonoscopy when they’re 65 and already obese and hypertensive and starting to form polyps,” Dr. Chutkan said. “I really wanted to send the message that exercise and proper nutrition are really potent tools for disease prevention.”

With so many gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses related to obesity, gastroenterologists encounter it routinely, but dealing with it in an office visit can be problematic.

“There’s so little time when we interact with patients these days, we barely have enough time to treat the underlying problems [patients] bring to the table when they come in,” said Steven M. Faber, MD, a gastroenterologist at Albemarle Gastroenterology Associates, in Elizabeth City, N.C.

“To be fair, the ASGE is an endoscopic society, so it’s not necessarily their charter,” Dr. Chutkan said. “But I feel that as gastroenterologists, we need to do more about obesity.”

Initially, some ASGE board members were skeptical that people would pay a charitable organization a considerable sum of money to run 26.2 miles. But Dr. Chutkan had a couple of champions in the form of Brian Fennerty, MD, current ASGE president and long-time runner, and Grace Elta, MD, professor of medicine at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, and past president of the ASGE, a reluctant runner herself but a life-long fitness enthusiast.

“When Robynne brought this to the governing board, asking for financial



Above: After the race, runners are all smiles. Pictured left to right: Fabian Emura, MD, PhD, of EmuraCenter LatinoAmerica, Bogotá, Colombia; Jaroslav Zivny, MD, of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, Worcester; and David Nemoto, MD, of Memorial Endoscopy Center, Houston, who won 1st place overall with the impressive time of 19:50. Above right: Gutrunners founder, Robynne Chutkan, MD, welcomes participants in the first ever Gutrunners event.

Left: The inaugural Gutrunners DDW 5K Race/1-Mile Walk took place at the 2010 DDW meeting in New Orleans. Above: Race sponsor Pentax fielded a strong team, including 1st place female finisher Kara Woods (23:29).

support to get it off the ground, I thought it was a great idea," Dr. Elta said. "Other societies use this approach to raise money for patient care, indigent care, education and research, and I thought if we could do this for CRC, that would be great."

"We're making some inroads on it, but CRC is still a very common deadly cancer in the United States," Dr. Elta continued. "How could you say no to that if you're an endoscopic society? I hope that it can be a successful foundation, because it has great goals."

The ASGE board agreed to be the founding sponsor of Gutrunners in December 2009. The organization was incorporated in the fall of 2009 and received 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in April 2010. "Then we decided, since the organization was up and running and we have some shekels, let's do some races," Dr. Chutkan said.

Dr. Chutkan hopes to add more marathons to the Gutrunners' schedule in the coming years, along with more shorter road races. And she hopes to expand the DDW race participant figures into the thousands.

"I'd also like to involve the larger communities where DDW is held," Dr. Chutkan said, for instance, opening up the races to local running organizations "as a way for us as physicians to also have an interaction with the athletic community of that city."

Inaugural DDW Race a Success

The inaugural DDW race gave participants an opportunity to move out of the convention center and experience the greater New Orleans area, and also offered an opportunity for meeting attendees to interact with various

stakeholders in GI health. Sarah Streett, MD, a gastroenterologist with Permanente Medical Group, in Vallejo, Calif., enjoyed seeing colleagues and running with industry representatives.

"A lot of people from Pentax rallied," said Dr. Streett. "It's a challenging time now in terms of relationships between people in medicine and drug companies and industry. But we really do all need one another, and there was a nice feeling [at the race] of bringing people who are in gastroenterology together."

Funds raised through Gutrunners events will go to obesity and CRC research (25%); the colonoscopy access program, which screens uninsured patients (25%); and patient education (50%).

"That's the fun thing," Dr. Chutkan said. "Right now we're trying to set up a program for school nurses to do more screening for obesity, and also a bit of a curriculum for kids on healthy eating."

Eventually, schools may be able to apply to Gutrunners to receive grants, for example, for support for an underfunded physical education program or for a nutritionist to educate parents and faculty about making healthy eating decisions.

"I consider Gutrunners to be the grassroots message of gastroenterology," Dr. Chutkan said. "If you do this stuff really well, you're unlikely to need the services of a gastroenterologist with any regularity. You might argue, gosh, you're getting rid of your client base. But digestive diseases are not going to go away, and we need to approach them from a grassroots level as well as our more sophisticated endoscopic approach."

For more information about Gutrunners, visit the Web site at www.gutrunners.com. ■

Benefits of Running Are Manifold

BY MONICA J. SMITH

Money raised by Gutrunners participants helps to improve the health of others by increasing access to colorectal cancer (CRC) screening for those who can't afford it and by supporting education and research. And through their participation, Gutrunners supporters themselves experience the benefits of regular vigorous exercise and endurance training.

"People realize, at the end of the day, that they've improved their own health dramatically while fundraising to improve someone else's," said Robynne Chutkan, MD, Gutrunners founder and associate professor of medicine at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C.

Running isn't for everyone, but for those who enjoy it and whose bodies can tolerate the physical demand, it's a remarkably efficient way to stay fit.

"If you've got decent knees and you do it the right way, I think it's the best exercise out there," commented Steven M. Faber, MD, a gastroenterologist with Albemarle Gastroenterology Associates, in Elizabeth City, N.C., who recently returned to running after a long hiatus.

While the benefits of running are vast—weight loss, maintenance of fitness, mood enhancement, bone and muscle strengthening, cardiovascular health—there are specific benefits to digestive health, "remembering that the GI tract is one long muscle," Dr. Chutkan said.

If we start at the top and work our way down, one of the most common things that gastroenterologists see is gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), Dr. Chutkan said. "One of the reasons people have GERD is because the stomach emptying is really sluggish. There's no question that exercise helps with contractility of the stomach."

Running can help relieve the bloating and constipation associated with motility problems that can occur in relatively sedentary individuals and in patients with digestive diseases that affect motility. "I think patients with irritable bowel syndrome, who are some of the most challenging for us to treat, would get a lot out of the exercise benefits because they experience a lot of fatigue and depression," Dr. Faber said.

Regular exercise, such as running, also may help patients with diverticulitis.

"A recent article showed that there are fewer episodes of complicated diverticulitis in people who exercise," Dr. Chutkan said. "And there

are a lot of studies showing that exercise can reduce the risk of CRC. A sedentary lifestyle, regardless of whether you are overweight, increases your risk of CRC."

As a weight loss tool, running addresses the comorbidities of obesity that affect the GI tract. For instance, obesity is a significant risk factor for reflux. "You can reduce the size of the hiatal hernia by reducing belly fat, then you can benefit with either less reflux symptoms or less required medication to control your symptoms," Dr. Faber said.

Carrying too much weight also is associated with gallstone disease and gallbladder disease. "People who are overweight are more at risk for these diseases, so running as a way to decrease weight helps with that," Dr. Chutkan said.

People who have a great deal of excess weight, however, may not be able to meet the physical demands of running at first.

"You have to build up to it—walking on the treadmill, a little jogging in between," Dr. Faber said. "As you build respiratory fitness, you move to the next level. That's when you really start feeling good—when you can run."

And for those who think they are too old for strenuous activity, think again.

"You can't complain that you're 50 when you see marathon runners in their 80s," Dr. Faber said.

'People realize, at the end of the day, that they've improved their own health dramatically while fundraising to improve someone else's.'

—Robynne Chutkan, MD



Left: Jean-Frédéric Colombel, MD, of Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Lille, France, approaches the turnaround marking the halfway point in the 5K race. Below: Runners take off in the 5K Race.

