In Praise of Bicycles – and Exercise

by simonrees - Saturday, October 15, 2011


In my last blog, I attempted to summarize what Field Control Therapy (FCT) is - by introducing the idea of design - and I sought to show how important it is in medicine to have a well-designed system. I theorized that this may be why FCT, based on the concepts of Living Systems Medicine, has been a popular course of study for engineers. Next, by way of example or parallel, I’m going to take on a rather different issue – bicycling – and relate it also to questions of health as well as much else. . . Be warned, all car drivers – you may find cause for offence in my writing today, and if I take it too far, may I apologise in advance - although perhaps it may be a worthy debate either way!

Consider this: the bicycle is a truly beautiful design. Do you have one?

Take a look at it. Surely it is almost as near perfection as any human design can get. (I can understand why Flann O'Brien wrote about characters falling in love with their bicycles - more from him later!)

It is compact. It can even be folded up in some designs (my father, for example, cycled from San Francisco to New York on a fold-up bike). It is easy to learn to ride. It can go fast or slow. It’s hard to kill someone with one. It’s good for the heart. It helps the rider stay fit and healthy. When riding it, there’s no shortage of fresh air. It affords a great all-round view of the passing scenery, and allows us to be more connected to nature as we travel. It requires no fuel except your own legs, and yet your legs don’t need to feel any jolt from touching the ground, making it a
healthier form of exercise than jogging. It's no wonder that gyms the world over are full of exercise bikes - yet why bother with those when you can have the joy of a real bike in the fresh air?

Using gears, it's easy to adjust for different slopes. It's a quick and easy way to travel a mile or, for enthusiasts, a hundred miles. It gives off no pollution. It doesn't harm the environment. It's not directly dependent on any fossil fuels. It can even be a sociable mode of transport, with fellow cyclists chatting as they ride. When there are traffic jams, you can slip between and ahead of the cars easily on your bike, because no one ever heard of a traffic jam or rush hour delay caused by bicycles.

It's cheap to buy a bike, and just as cheap to maintain it.

What's more, you can do your shopping on a bike, with a good pair of panniers strapped to the back, as I have. I do all of my shopping on a bike. You can also take bikes on trains, as I do sometimes when I bring the shopping home.

Although I have a driving licence, to date I have chosen not to own a car. I am proud of that fact. I make that choice because of all the many above advantages of cycling... I use my car licence from time to time, in rental cars when travelling, or in cars of family and friends. Other times, I make use of taxis, or scrounge a lift with someone. But more often, I use either public transport, and/or my bicycle, and/or my own two feet, and feel pleased that I've been able to keep it up so many years (thus far, up to age 33)! I may find cause to get a car at some stage in the future, and in that case, will do so... But till then, I'm doing just fine without...
way. I look around and see that most people these days do almost everything by car. In our culture, it seems that getting a car has become largely something it is assumed everyone does - rather than something one makes a conscious choice to do under special circumstances - and perhaps the same could be said about mobile phones.

**Built to Last?**

Given my description above, I think it is fair to say that the bicycle is such an ingenious design that it is likely to be with us still in thousands of years from now.

That’s what I mean by a truly good design – something of true design is here for good. Take the wheel – what a fine invention that was! No one knows who invented the wheel, but one thing’s for sure – it was a hit! Since it was invented, it has been with us for goodness knows how many thousands of years, and will most likely remain with us for good. Wheels are pure genius. And of course, bicycles have wheels, which is part of what makes them good, but with bikes, of course, it’s the way the wheels are used that counts. . .

By parallel, orthodox medicine on the whole, as we know it today, seems not to be built to last – at least not at its heart, in its core model, even though aspects of it will undoubtedly be maintained or recycled into future systems. Design issues are leading to too many failures in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases.

Behind the smoke and mirrors of the wizardry of "hi-tech" modern medicine is at times a paucity of worth when it comes to the concepts guiding the glitzy technology (with some major exceptions). In contrast, the sound premise of Living Systems Medicine - which integrates the best of both orthodox and unorthodox medicine - forms a solid backbone to how medicine ought to be practised, because it bases itself on the multi-level integration and fundamentals of universal sciences.

Note that my comments here have nothing to do with a brand or a name. . . It’s not about a “brand of therapy” or someone’s name. The wheel, for example, may have gone by ten thousand names since it was invented in antiquity, but the basic fact remains that it was a sound system of motion. Likewise, the principles of Living Systems Medicine represent a sound system of medicine not because of the name, but rather, the concepts. . . or design.

So what sort of future lies in store for the bicycle? Okay, I’m sure there will be variants, and there may also be improvements of details, e.g., it’s annoying the way bike tyres go flat so often – let’s face it! But these are only details. I foresee that the bicycle is such a good invention that it will stay with us for a long long time to come.
Now let’s take a sobering look at cars. Can we say the same about them? I believe not. I predict that unlike bicycles, cars do not have much of a future. What will take the place of cars I do not know, but I do know that cars are not a design built to last.

Consider the reasons, by comparison: Cars are currently dependent on limited resources such as fossil fuels. They pollute the vicinity of roads and the atmosphere and are thought to contribute also to global warming. But even if you put aside ecology, there’s worse to come for the individual. Let’s loosen the collar, and brace ourselves . . .

**Cars – A Health Menace? A Sober Look at the Role of Exercise in Health**

Because of frequently being the lazy man’s mode of transport, cars make a central contribution to many health conditions these days including:

- heart disease
- coronary artery disease
- cerebro-vascular disease/strokes
- diabetes
- obesity
- syndrome "X"/metabolic syndrome/insulin resistance
- COPD
- depression
- insomnia
- osteoporosis
- osteoarthritis
- gall stones
- increased risk of side effects from any surgery in obese patients
- and let’s not forget cancer too (especially of the colon and breast - two leaders in cancer deaths)

These are not the only ones, but are just a few of the common health problems for which a lack of exercise is currently considered to be frequently a contributing factor. The list above also happens to include many of the major illnesses of our civilization.

For those aware of heavy metal toxicity and its role in chronic degenerative diseases, there is also an argument that lack of exercise can contribute to practically any illness, due to the function of exercise in helping to prevent lymphatic congestion, which can lead to exacerbated heavy metal retention anywhere in the body.

Millions of people fail to get their daily exercise and fresh air due to car addiction.

For this reason I’d suggest that cars may be considered worse for the health than smoking, overall. This is a simple fact which some may not like to hear, and which for this reason the mass media rarely brings up. In a society where practically everyone loves their car, who wants to admit that it’s slowly killing them?

According to surveys I have read, over 90% of car rides are short ones which could easily have been done by bike or foot (at any rate, this may apply for most people in the world who don’t live in places like
L.A. where pavements appear to be missing at times!) In other words, most of the congestion on the roads (let alone in our arteries) would be easily avoided if we lived in a less lazy society – or rather, one which didn’t put cars on a pedestal and rubbish the image of cycling...

And although that’s already bad enough, that’s not all I have to say about cars...

**Some More Noble Characteristics of Cars**

As you may know already, cars are an EMF-hazard (electro-magnetic field hazard), especially for those in the front seats, and with the new tide of electric or hybrid cars things have got worse rather than better.

In a regular car, according to my measurements, parts of the driver's body sit in an average magnetic field of 150-200 nanotesla (which is significantly above occupational safety standards in some countries) - in other words, driving is no longer a healthy pastime. Bicycles, need I add, are electromagnetically angelic - another reason they are so healthy, and another reason why they are a vehicle designed to last thousands of years, a thing of perfection!

In all the surveys I have conducted, measuring cars using my electromagnetic field strength meters, I have found two cars with minimal EMFs. One was a French patient of mine who smiled when I could not find any EMF readings in the driver's seat - it turned out he had had the electrics of his car specially shielded! Clever chap! The other was a diesel engine - which, to my surprise, tested as far better, EMF-wise, than the average petrol engine.

Installing a "Vehicle Memon" device on the car battery definitely helps mitigate the health effects of the EMFs inside cars according to patient testimony, and has other side benefits such as increasing the car's fuel efficiency.

Even better would be if cars were designed more intelligently - with reduced electrics, instead of having more and more added on each year.

Even better still would be if people got out in the fresh air a bit more on bicycles rather than depending exclusively on cars to get about. As well as good old-fashioned walking. . . (You know, along pavements and footpaths? One foot in front of the other?) A friend in south Dublin decided the other day not to get the bus or tram to the Botanic Gardens in the north of the city, where they were holding public talks. "I fancy a walk," she said. It took her several hours to walk across the city. I was impressed, but part of me also wondered why this struck me as so unusual? I guess it's because it's what my grandfather used to do, who never learned to drive, but spent his whole life going out on walks - everywhere and nowhere; but it has become an unusual thing to do. Definitely not trendy. . . !

And as to GPS systems, and people using mobile phones inside of vehicles - I won't even go there! Except to mention the word "ricochet". . .

Cars are also noisy and disturb passers-by. They are unsociable in general and at times anti-social, because isolated from each other and the nature around, making road rage an inevitability that rarely arises for a cyclist (except occasionally when intimidated by passing cars!)
They are bulky and so tend to create traffic jams and endless rush hour miseries.

They are uneconomical compared to trains or buses, because the majority of car rides consist of only one person in the vehicle.

They are dangerous, leading to over a million road crash deaths in the world per year. (Let's say 'crash', rather than 'accident').

Compared to bikes (or to legs!), they are expensive both to buy and maintain. And instead of encouraging transport around local communities – as bikes used to do here in Ireland, formerly a great cycling culture – cars have instead contributed to a breakdown of a sense of local community in many places. Here in Ireland, sadly, few people cycle any more.

**Why Don’t More People Cycle?**

I don’t know what has happened to the image of cycling – it seems to have become associated with being the “poor man’s mode of transport”. Is this because of the success of car advertising? Or perhaps because the bicycle is an easy albeit unjust scapegoat for car-users, who in general may prefer not to face facts about what cars are doing to our health?

I remember seeing a film at the cinema in which there was a book club, and one member came on his bike whereas the rest drove. It was clear that Hollywood sought to betray the cyclist as the eccentric, the health and fitness fanatic, the weirdo. . . Yet I believe this bizarre image of cycling can be thrown out - it need not be like this, where people like me enjoy cycling as a normal part of life and not as a fanatic pastime at all. You don't need to stock up on cycling trousers, special shoes, goggles and other paraphernalia. . . I believe that daily cycling ought to be as natural a part of people's lives as getting up in the morning, breathing air and eating meals. . .

Although I live in a country once famed for its bicycle culture, often I’m the only one on the road for many miles around, and it’s rare I’ll even meet another cyclist between setting off and returning home. . . which leads me to wonder not just, “What has happened to our sense of healthy lifestyle?” but also, “What has happened to our sense of community?”

I wonder how often our readers cycle? Perhaps some of you are relatively keen cyclists? I wonder. Not that I do it for sport – unlike my father, a cycling enthusiast who has influenced my thinking on this
subject, I haven't really got into long-distance cycling. I never took it up, although I respect it. As for me, it’s usually just round and about the local roads and lanes. . . I shop, I potter, I explore, but usually just a few miles at a time. My point being, that you don't have to train for the Tour de France; for most of us, bicycles can represent a simple, enjoyable and useful daily form of exercise that beats most others, however large or little the distance.

A Note Regarding the Endocrine System

I think it is well worth mentioning in passing that my general message in this article doesn't apply to certain health situations. There are definitely exceptions where the problem is not a lack of exercise, but a lack of capacity to exercise.

This is also, in my view, an under-recognized syndrome (and one worthy of an article in its own right). A key example which springs to mind concerns the endocrine system (incorporating areas such as the hypothalamo-pituito-adrenal axis) which basically fuels our daily activities via steroid hormones such as cortisol, and there is a growing awareness in the alternative healthcare community that a significant percentage of the modern population have either chronic states or acute episodes of endocrine fatigue (and/or over-compensatory mania in response to underlying endocrine fatigue - when we run on empty).

There are a number of reasons for this, among which two major players are mercury (a common dental poison which deposits preferentially in endocrine glands) and EMFs (microwave radiation from mobile phones and towers, for example, has been shown to depress adrenal function via a number of mechanisms). In my experience, the best approach is to restore healthy or optimal endocrine function first, using the tools of Living Systems Medicine, and then re-introduce regular exercise later once the endocrine system is ready to fuel it. To do so prematurely would just exhaust the endocrine glands even further in such cases.

However, for the rest of the population, assuming the endocrine system is up for it, lifestyle habits appear to be a more common reason for lack of exercise. . .

Over-Exercise During Detoxification Treatments

It's also worth noting that there is another common situation where over-exercise can be a concern: during detoxification regimes.

For example, during FCT treatments, often there is a window of 2 (or sometimes more) days, on average once every few weeks, where remedies are given to focus the body's resources on having a blitz on detoxification while special care is taken to maintain an environment optimal to detox on these days (in relation to factors such as EMFs). Over-exercise of any particular muscles or tissues on these days (including, even, brain functions and/or emotionally traumatic things to cope with) may hinder the smooth flow of heavy metals and chemicals out of the body's elimination pathways, causing some of them to accumulate instead in the muscles or other tissues which are under duress.

To give a random example, a patient of mine was recently on the first day of her detox sequence of remedies when she received a stark rejection from the man she was in love with - and not only that, but
she received this news not from him directly, but from a woman that was with him. This naturally catapulted her already fragile emotional state into paroxysms of additional stress, alleviated only (she later told me) by the comfort of friends and then going to pray at church the next day.

To give another example, I have seen patients pull muscles in the midst of a detox, only to find that the pain lingers afterwards.

If this sort of thing happens, it can be easily remedied again through re-testing and/or the addition of extra support remedies, usually for the organs that received the added "spike" of toxicity dose, fed into the local tissue by the increased blood supply (picture all those blood cells, with toxins mixed in, saying, "Hey, where's the party? Show me where the action is. . . ") However, the best approach is of course to avoid the trouble in the first place! So this is why I advise my patients not to over-tax themselves in ANY way while detoxing - if it's avoidable - but instead to take it easy. As far as exercise goes on these days, it should be limited to mild, gentle exercise only. The lady above naturally received some additional support for her Emotional Centre in the days afterwards, whereas in cases of pulled muscles, some additional support for the musculo-skeletal system may be indicated.

A Note Regarding Other Forms of Exercise

Lest you wonder why I'm focusing so exclusively on cycling, I should acknowledge that there are many other healthy forms of exercise too, of course! I chose to use cycling as a key central example, to make the point. It's true that other forms of exercise may help develop other parts of the body, too, that are not developed so much in cycling, such as, say, the arms and shoulders - in a more complete exercise programme.

In addition, though, a point that is rarely brought up is that in my view the best forms of exercise are those which fulfil the following criteria - and you will note that GYMS fail on ALL counts:

1. Better in the fresh air than indoors (when else are we going to escape unhealthy indoor air, and when else are we going to connect to nature? - which is surely just as important as exercise to a healthy lifestyle as well as to the human psyche)
2. Better if EMFs are avoided completely, or at least greatly minimized (both cars and gymnasia are filled with EMF hazards, surely making it an oxymoron to label a gym a location that has anything to do with health)
3. Better if chemicals (e.g. cleaning sprays and fluids) are not poured all over the places where you will be placing your hands or skin (gyms tend to be not only full of immuno-toxic chemical cleaning substances, but furthermore some make it a "rule" that surfaces be re-sprayed after each user)

Of course, there are many other discussions we could have about what may contribute to making different forms of exercise good or bad - but that is beyond the scope of this article (although I'm interested in any readers' views), so I chose to focus above on three points which are so neglected that they are rarely if ever mentioned. . .

A quick point about swimming, too. . . It has been proposed that swimming is an ideal form of exercise, and I for one love swimming. . . in the sea. The same points above may apply to swimming pools, regarding chemicals, indoor air and isolation from nature! My favourite swimming pools have been
outdoor ones without chemicals added (speaking of which, there is also a Memon swimming pool transformer which, according to their studies, works better than chlorine in terms of its anti-bacterial effect - a rather interesting note about Memon which surprised me when I first discovered this!)

As regards sports - which are many people's favourite form of exercise - I'm all in favour, with a few provisos. . . One which springs to mind is the same riff concerning chemicals. Beware golf courses and sports pitches which tend to be a source of regular herbicide and pesticide exposure, contributing to immuno-suppression since we often find residues of these substances in people's livers or bone marrow during FCT testing. . . Here in Galway, the local kids also play out on the grass all the time, and a man comes to spray herbicides on a regular basis, leaving no sign or warning on the grass, and with little toddlers rolling around just behind where he has sprayed. Call that sensible?

Is Cycling Too Unsafe for Most People These Days?

The most common complaint about cycling which is given, apparently, is that those who live in congested areas such as cities feel it is unsafe to be on the road on a bike.

On that note, I'd like to tell an inspiring little family story which may hopefully help antidote these types of fears. . .But first, a few general reflections.

Part of this discussion relates to the perceived danger - versus the real danger. I was chatting with my father about this today and he caught my attention with an interesting statistic. Apparently, someone has done the calculation and estimated that driving cars is mile for mile 20 times more dangerous than cycling once you factor in all the health and mortality risks associated with the health conditions I listed above, rather than bearing in mind only immediate risks.

If (to take a ludicrous analogy) you were to pay an organisation of hired killers to come and kill you in 10 years from now (I can't think of a reason why you would do that, of course!), then the fact your action is putting you at risk not immediately but in a decade from now doesn't make your action a safe one. So a true risk assessment surely needs to consider both short and long term consequences of your choices.

Of course, a car gives a false sense of security and safety but is in fact also an intrinsically dangerous activity, as is cycling on roads dominated by motorists. . . An uncle of mine once declared to me as a child that "A car is a dangerous weapon, much more dangerous in general than a gun!"

So yes, in a car culture, for those of us forced to ride our bikes on roads filled with cars, without enough cycle lanes, and with fewer bikes to accompany us, cycling becomes dangerous - but then so is driving - and the main cause in both cases is the cars, rather than the bikes. . . Yet the above observation still stands, regarding a 20-fold higher degree of danger for motorists once health effects are also factored in.

There are also some ways to make cycling safer. First of all, there is the question of cycling technique. My father taught me the importance of riding a bicycle assertively - not hugging the kerb in fear of passing cars, but rather, taking more of a primary position and cycling a little distance out from the kerb, especially near to junctions. Yes, some drivers will find it annoying, but I can live with that if it helps saves lives. This way, they see you more clearly, and are less inclined to try and squeeze past you, putting lives at risk.
I'm not saying that cyclists shouldn't let cars pass! There's a balance - and it helps to be just far enough out that the cars are that much more likely to see you, slow down a little and take you into account... Better that than cars driving on oblivious to your presence at the edge of their field of vision - which has presumably been the cause of many deaths among cyclists. It's important as cyclists that we feel at home on the roads too, and that we assert our right of way and not feel too pushed aside by the cars.

There are other ways to ensure we are seen by motorists, of course, helping to make cycling safer. When cycling at night, lights are important. And eye contact with drivers is always helpful. For example, when I am cycling, I make a point of seeking the driver's eye contact at junctions before I will ride in front of a car. This may sound excessive, but I prefer to be cautious about little things like this than end up run over. This even applies sometimes when I am passing a side road, where I have the right of way, but a car is waiting at the junction to pull out into my road. In such circumstances, my advice would be - never mind about who has the right of way - what matters more is to get the driver's eye contact, so that you know you have been seen before you ride in front of his or her bonnet!

There are also other, larger solutions, on a population level.

Towns and cities can be better designed to favour bicycles over cars, and/or to create separate systems of cycle lanes (more on both of these inspiring sentiments at the end, from "Richard's Bicycle Book"!), and we can all play a role in making these things happen in our local communities by sharing our proposals with local councils.

After all, the main thing preventing us from living in a more Utopian society is surely ourselves; when it comes to things like our chosen transport systems, we live in the society we collectively desire, create or allow, and in my view this is an example of an easy way to move our civilization closer to a Utopian ideal - by all of us favouring bicycles more than we do.

Perhaps there are even two opposing attitudes in relation to bikes - and exercise. Maybe bikes - and natural forms of daily exercise - will never become trendy until we look at the reasons so many people are averse, and re-evaluate our motives in the light of health priorities. Part of our civilization, after all, has consisted of the historical struggle to rise above work for subsistence - usually in the form of hard manual labour. Naturally, this has made many people around the world averse to exercise, in their efforts to attain wealth and "not have to" make the physical effort. Cars are, I think, a part of this trend towards putting status and convenience above exercise and health, in terms of values. Or, as Winston Churchill is alleged to have said:

I love work. I can sit and watch it all day.

- and:

There are two types of work. One involves moving objects from A to B, is badly paid, and hard. The other involves telling people to move objects from A to B, is well paid, and easy.

Now if the roads seem too dangerous for bikes, then it's because we make them that way by stepping into our own car every day...
It is also true that the more cyclists there are on the road, the more drivers get used to them, making cycling safer and safer.

What bothers me most, and one of the reasons I'm writing this blog, is that here in one of the four main population areas of Ireland I so often feel alone as a cyclist on the roads, and wonder to myself: where are all the other people who could and should be out on their bikes too? Then - whizz - there passes another car - hurtling forward at breakneck speed, with only one person on board, driving as though in a hurry to get to the hospital, when in reality the true purpose of the drive is usually a mundane local one.

Here is a sample of some fascinating statistics that may encourage more of us to cycle, extracted from the current version of the Wikipedia page entitled "Safety in Numbers":

- After cycling was promoted in Finland, the number of trips increased by 72% and there was a 75% drop in cyclists' deaths.
- In Germany: between 1975 and 1998, the percent of trips made by bicycle rose from 8% to 12%, and cyclist fatalities fell by 66%.
- In New York: during the period 1999-2007, the amount of cycling increased by 98%, and the absolute number of cyclists killed or seriously injured decreased by 29%.
- In London: between 2000 and 2008, the number of bicycle trips made in London, UK doubled. Over the same period, serious bicycle injuries declined by 12%.
- In the Netherlands: between 1980 and 2005, cycling increased by 45%, and cyclist fatalities decreased by 58%.

Now on to the story:

My dad worked most of his career as a G.P. in a rough inner-city neighbourhood of Bristol, a bustling city with about half a million inhabitants. Every day he commuted to work across the city, covering about 3 and a half miles each way. He used to go mostly by car. Then one day he had an epileptic seizure, a new medical development in his life (N.B. at that time he still had mercury dental fillings, galvanic currents and all), and so his driving licence was taken away for a one-year period. He decided to start cycling to work, and became the doctor on two wheels.

What was interesting is that when he got his driving licence back a year later, although he used a car for other purposes, he never went back to commuting to work routinely by car. In his mid-40s, he liked the cycling routine so much, he stuck to it. . .

So for day after day, year after year, he not only cycled miles into work and back via busy inner-city roads (and many backroads), but typically cycled home again for the lunch break too, and then sometimes cycled all round the city too by night for his frequent night shifts working house visits. He'd cover on average about 14 miles a day plus more when doing nights.

The reason his story touched me, and seems relevant here, is that it leaves me wondering: what stops others from cycling, mostly in far easier places and circumstances? My father told me that he not only enjoyed cycling into work more than driving, come rain or shine, but what’s more, it ended up being significantly faster and more reliable because he needn’t get caught up in any traffic.
The Joy of Cycling

Enjoyment should be mentioned, too. There’s something exhilarating about a good cycle-ride.

Of course, driving a car can be enjoyable too, but the enjoyment of cycling seems to be on a whole other level. Inside a car, you don’t feel the direct breeze in your face, the connection to the landscape or the feeling of freedom and genuine motion. The difference between driving a car and riding a bike, when it comes to enjoyment, may be perhaps a little like the difference between a computer game adventure and a real one. Of course, both are real, but when you're on the bike, it just feels so much more immediate and real: you are no longer boxed inside your vehicle behind a set of electronic controls - instead, you end up feeling like perhaps Bruce Springsteen was feeling when he wrote the following line from his 1978 song "Badlands":

"For the ones who had a notion, and a notion deep inside,

That it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive!"

When I used to live in La Laguna de Tenerife, half-way up a steep volcano in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, one of my pleasures at one time was sometimes to cycle all the way down to Santa Cruz at sea-level, on my way into work! What a way to start the day. In a car or bus, it just never felt as exhilarating as that (and fortunately I could put the bike into the luggage compartment of the local bus on the way back up!) – it’s easy to forget that you’re alive when you’re sitting inside a sealed vehicle, and for all the glory and status afforded to cars in our society, let’s face it, driving is just a matter of sitting lazily in a seat while making slight, gentle movements of the hands and feet – in other words, it involves almost no movement, and does not stimulate the heart or the lymphatics or the senses as a bicycle does. Driving a car is more a case of sensory deprivation, isolation and severely limited bodily movements.

Speaking of enjoyment, my love of cycling must have rubbed off on me from my father’s influence. His attitude towards bikes and cars – similar to the one I’m describing here – made sense to me from an early
age, and maybe even dating back to the cycling lessons he used to give us on the local downs. And so this might be a good moment to recommend “Richard’s Bicycle Book” too – a gift he made to me in my teens, and from which I’ll quote below!

Once, when I was a kid, my father came to visit us during the summer holidays at our grandmother’s house, about a hundred miles from his house. He asked me, “Guess what mode of transport I used to get here.”

I never guessed right! “Car? Bus? Train? Lorry? Boat? Plane? Hot air balloon?” I went through so many things, but the answer was, “I cycled!” And perhaps that’s indicative of the status of bikes in modern culture – the forgotten gem of transport?

The Importance of Enjoying Your Daily Exercise

Even if Arnold Schwarzenegger has said, "No pain, no gain," I have a different philosophy of exercise. Perhaps there are just different styles, and different characters - who knows! But I believe enjoyment is the key.

Surely a common reason people don't exercise enough is that they haven't found a form of daily exercise they enjoy - something to look forward to and revel in. If I go out cycling, walking, running or swimming, it usually brings me pleasure. I savour those moments of the day, take time to look up at the trees, ponder life's marvels and feel the joy of my blood vessels and respiratory passages pumping life round my tissues. It is invigorating, earthing and there is an immediacy to it which also makes it a fine form of meditation practice - if you wish it to be so. A cousin of mine used to go running through the forests, fields and lanes for hours at a time, and used to talk to me about the altered states of bliss and mindfulness he would attain.

Now if it so happens that you, or someone you know, simply fail to find exercise enjoyable, two common reasons that spring to mind might be:

(a) try an attitude change - sometimes as adults we become too negative and dismissive of things which we all enjoyed in childhood, like stamping our feet in mudpools and climbing trees - or exploring the outdoors like dogs and children love to do on walks ("Oh, what's this? Ah, look at that!") - with the healthy curiosity of youth - so why not stoke it again?

(b) alternatively, I know many people (mostly patients) who would simply be incapable of enjoying exercise due to ill health, particularly when endocrine exhaustion is involved, as mentioned earlier. . . (Other common reasons could include depression, panic disorders, chronic pain syndromes and others). And this is likely far more common than you may realize. If that applies to you, then I would advocate treatment first, including an FCT detoxification programme, rather than exercise. In my clinical experience, an exercise programme is - like a meditation programme - something better suited to people who are relatively well and non-toxic, as opposed to being full of bioaccumulated heavy metals. . .

Intense exercise seems to depend at least in part on the health of various tissues such as the adrenal glands, and meditation practice seems (in my observation) to depend at least in part on the relative health of the neurological and endocrine systems. Of course, in both cases, the relationship is two-way, as these
activities nourish our organs too - but there also seems to be a prerequisite starting position, as a thumb-rule. . .

Yet I hear of many doctors or "health gurus" advising chronic invalids either to take up some form of daily exercise as a "cure", and/or suggesting that meditation and/or some sort of spiritual practice "holds the key". My only response to this is - that people in relatively good health so easily forget what it's like to be ill! A little empathy - and remembrance - would put paid to unsuitable theories of this nature. . .

Think back to the last time you had the 'flu and just had to crawl into bed - would you REALLY have been in a fit state to go for a jog, or to sit erect and do some chanting or watch your thoughts passing by? (Meditation practice does tend to involve, among other things, mental focus, which consumes energy and so makes a basic level of physical and mental stamina a good idea if it is not to drain one's resources and worsen illness - which is all a matter of plain common sense that is often overlooked).

Incidentally, I don't discount the evolution of spiritual realizations and breakthroughs for people in ill health, either, just because I don't advocate they chase after it if available body resources cannot keep up - I have only to remember people such as Franz Schubert and Frederic Chopin, both of whom reached some of their highest levels of creative and spiritual inspiration while in the throes of severe physical illness. . . Yet, as George Sand once said of her partner Chopin, his work was in spite of his long-term tuberculosis, rather than because of it, and she commented on Amadeus Mozart's great state of health, by comparison. . . And as to physical over-exertion, there are other cases that spring to mind, such as Vincent van Gogh, whose fanatic over-work, combined with the toxicity of his work tools and habits, seemed to contribute to pushing him over the edge, by draining and poisoning his system. . . All of which goes to confirm (perhaps) my common sense observations above about not pushing the human body beyond its natural limits, especially when drained? Restoration first - utilization after. . .

Or, as Dr Yurkovsky has just taught at his new 2011 medical seminar, drawing from the topic of "evolutionary principles" applied to medicine, all systems - including the human body - have their natural limits and conditions under which they can function. This common sense (and scientific) approach is a far cry from the rising trend of the "mind over matter" philosophy that many colleagues seem to espouse. It also seems more respectful of our bodies to understand them, rather than treating them as slaves to our mental desires, affirmations and grandiose "we create our own reality" belief systems. . . A more respectful approach to our bodies might be to seek to befriend rather than subdue them. . . Or, as the Chinese traditionally advocated, balance is key - when it comes to our exercise habits, as in all matters of lifestyle. . .

**Bicycles and the Living Systems Revolution**

You may also rightly wonder what any of this has to do with systems science, and this website. . . I’d suggest that the emphasis I’m placing on things which are well-designed is essentially a systems priority: once we take a systems perspective, we start being interested in how all the parts of the system work together, with the ultimate goal of understanding, creating or assisting an effective grand design. . .

After all, medicine at its best is the approach that can help the human body in its wonderful design – therefore optimal medicine needs to start by basing itself on as thorough an understanding of that design as possible. . . From this point of view, perhaps my parallel example of a bike – even though it is a
different type of system to a human body – is nonetheless a noble example of how a well-designed system is literally built to last, instead of built to fall?

Another systems concept is to avoid an overly myopic outlook on a subject, and instead link it outwards to various other related entities and factors, to gain more perspective. In this sense, a car appears to be a fine system when we measure it based purely on speed and convenience, but when we start looking at the wider issues of lifestyle habits, exercise-related prevention of illnesses, and both social and ecological issues related to transportation, then we start appreciating how much better a bicycle is designed to take account of all of these multiple factors efficiently.

Further, I view the bicycle as a fine contribution to human civilization, which seems set to remain a firm part of life to come for millennia, and which can merge seamlessly with a society that has been revolutionized by the Living Systems change of perspective. . . because bicycles add so much to quality of life, community and health.

It’s worth adding that, lest you think my attitude towards bicycles and cars appears strange, all this is a personal perspective I have, and has nothing to do with the FCT community at large! (Much of it, as you’ve seen, has been something I grew up with and came to share my father’s perspective on). I don’t know how many FCT practitioners like to cycle versus drive, nor do I know of any direct connection between FCT and cycling! But I hoped to find one in writing this. . . and in this blog, I have placed them side by side by way of drawing a few parallels, to make a point about design. . . as well as the role of cars in contributing to many diseases via lack of exercise.

Cars definitely have advantages – primarily speed and convenience. Sometimes I rent a car or get a taxi for exactly these reasons - sometimes there's no beating it. Likewise, sometimes a lift with a friend or relative is a great help.

But one can have too much of a good thing, and when it comes to cars, it seems that most people think of them as an essential daily vehicle, rather than something for special uses or special occasions.

As I hope I’ve illustrated, the advantages of speed and convenience come at great cost, and have a downside. Getting back to the theme I began with, I’ve sought to show also how a good design is not necessarily equated with popularity. Even though I believe bikes are better-designed than cars and will outlast them by thousands of years, we live in a time period where – for the moment anyway – cars are more popular, because most people prefer convenience to questions of design (a preference echoed also in medical fields?)

As to what sort of vehicle will take the place of the car when it goes the way of the Dodo - that's a fascinating question in its own right, and your guess is as good as mine.
By parallel, the most popular forms of medicine are not necessarily the best designed ones, nor the ones which are built to last!

After nearly a decade of involvement in FCT, I can personally vouch for its sound design and unequivocally state that its essence and its Living Systems Medicine model are built to last, by basing themselves on a more complete set of scientific principles and system properties.

To repeat, aspects of car design are built to last, yet it seems that the overall car model will inevitably be replaced with a different vehicle design built to take account of the wider issues raised in this article, and I see this as a parallel of the future of medicine we can anticipate.

Within this future, I am not comparing Living Systems Medicine necessarily to bicycles – although it all depends on the context of your analogy! – but perhaps instead to another, different sort of vehicle which is taking shape to fit our needs in a more comprehensive and efficient manner than the flawed “car” of contemporary medicine has been doing. This newly emerging vehicle is set to be the one that can combine the best aspects of car design within a new over-arching model of vehicle that has all of the wonderful design qualities that a bicycle can be admired for.

So to avoid undue misunderstanding or name-calling, let’s call it a “third vehicle”! (as opposed to a “third policeman” as quoted below?)

I’ll close, for controversy, with a quote from “Richard’s Bicycle Book” which should hopefully be capable of provoking some strong responses in either direction (!) – and then, for fun, a quote from the zany Irish novel “The Third Policeman,” a masterpiece of surreal fantasy from Flann O’Brien in which bicycles happen to feature prominently:

“Everybody has dreams and here is one of mine: motor cars are banned from central areas of all major metropolitan regions. Each city provides free bicycles (with adjustable seats and handlebars) or recumbent tricycles (fitted with weather protection screens and large-load luggage carriers), scattered about to be used as needed. There are repair centres throughout town, as well as special racks in which machines in need of servicing can be left. A dream? Perhaps. This is the age of the automobile, but the ecological and economic extravagance concomitant with the use of motor vehicles for private transport is so tremendous that they will of necessity go the way of the Dodo bird...

“Action. Write to your local authority and ask them what they are doing to encourage cycling. What about cycleways? What about parking for cycles? Sixteen cycles will fit into the same space as one car. Design a cycleways system for your area. Mark on a map all the schools, factories, offices, shops, and places of interest that need to be served by a cycleway. Work out routes from residential areas to these areas which are as direct as possible, going along back streets, footpaths, bridlepaths, etc., and necessitate the minimum of construction. Some conflicts are unavoidable, and once the plan is accepted, will be resolved with traffic lights, bridges, or underpasses. Provide for recreational cycling and access to leisure facilities and the surrounding countryside.

“Once you have completed your plan/proposal, send it to your local authority asking for their comments, and send copies to the British Cycling Bureau and your local newspapers... you should get some action. If not, stir things up. Organise a bicycle demonstration/rally. Make sure the newspapers and TV stations
know about it... Demand that the authority create at least one experimental cycleway as a test. This has happened in many areas, and can happen in yours if you do something about it...

“Mobility and the nuclear family are factors of alienation... An industrial society, particularly a hyper-industrial society such as ours, inhibits relationships... The car, for example, is a tool of alienation. Giant shopping complexes are created to promote the use of cars. Gone is the local butcher, fishmonger, greengrocer, and frequent contact with known people, replaced by uniform packaging and uniform employees who work with customers the same as a nut-and-bolt assembler on a production line...

“And the curious thing is, if we do define mobility as a prime value, then in urban areas a car is the last thing we need. It just does not work. George Washington, riding a horse, made better time between his home in Alexandria, VA and the Capitol, a distance of some six miles, than today’s Washingtonian does driving a car. Trains, buses, bicycles, roller skates, steam- and electric-powered delivery vehicles are more than adequate – they are better. At present motor vehicles are very heavily subsidized by the general public, and if the users of this form of transportation were to pay the full cost they could not afford it. Support must now go to alternative (and cheaper) methods. Trains and buses must have racks for the free carrying of bicycles, Stations, terminals, businesses, and residences must have cycle parking facilities... It has to be possible to go anywhere in the country on a bicycle without getting involved with motor vehicles. No road or street should exist without a corresponding cycle path. Instead of squandering funds on motorways and traffic regulation, cities must provide free, simple, easily adjustable bicycles for intra-city use. And as for the car and lorry, in urban areas – Ban it!”

"The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who are nearly half people and half bicycles...when a man lets things go so far that he is more than half a bicycle, you will not see him so much because he spends a lot of his time leaning with one elbow on walls or standing propped by one foot at kerbstones."

(Extracted from “The Third Policeman”, by Flann O’Brien)