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Star on the rise, feet on the ground
Drinking it In

Café Scientifique puts a tasty twist on the free public lecture by serving healthy helpings of research alongside ales and appies.

BY GRANT KERR

CONTRARY TO WHAT YOUR MOTHER MAY HAVE SAID, A TRIP TO THE pub isn’t always bad for you. Neither for brain, nor body. Providing you walk.

As a child, Brian Christie, a UVic neuroscientist, remembers hearing such dire warnings about potential brain damage. It seemed, “every time you look the wrong way, you will lose some brain cells.”

Turns out that, yes, there are all sorts of ways you can lose brain cells—aging is chief among them. But you can also re-generate those neurons by doing something as simple as taking a walk: exercise benefits not only our bodies but our brains as well. In fact, exercise not only makes you smarter, it can help reduce symptoms of depression, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Alzheimer’s disease.

This was good news to the 100 people who packed the penthouse suite in Swans Hotel. Most of those gathered are over 50 and, no doubt, have done some thinking about their own mortality. Led by UVic’s Centre for Biomedical Research, they are here for Café Scientifique, a regular pub night that mixes ale and appetizers with health-related research done by some of the university’s—and Canada’s—top minds.

The topic? “Benefits of Exercise for your Brain: Hope or hype?” Anybody who had come in expecting the latter would have likely left with an extra spring in their step as Christie extolled the virtues of exercise for increasing brain capacity.

“When we exercise, we are increasing the number of synapses (the ‘telephones’ that allow neurons to talk to each other) and the cells themselves. You are taking your old cells and making them better and more proficient, as well as creating new cells,” Christie tells the crowd.
Dressed in jeans and a Centre for Biomedical Research golf shirt, Christie weaves stories about his education and research with hard science, employing a comic's timing.

This is the fourth Café Scientifique session and the most successful by a long shot. Many were turned away at the door after every nook and cranny was filled with the curious. When I arrived half an hour before the start time, the pubbier main-floor meeting space had been scrubbed in favour of the more spacious penthouse two floors up, crammed with art and antiques. I was able to grab one of the last seats, but was left craning my neck around a 12-foot red cedar Tsimshian house post created by Roy Henry Vickers.

Handling Christie’s introduction was the director of the Centre for Biomedical Research, Paul Zehr. His goal is to bring science to the people. Since beginning last fall, Café Scientifique has been building its audience. Zehr’s goal is six sessions a year. The idea has been an international smash since starting in Europe in the 1990s. Taking science into an informal setting allows the audience valuable one-on-one interaction with an expert.

“I’m a big anti-ivory tower guy,” Zehr says, explaining the pub setting attracts a wider audience than a free university theatre lecture might. To Zehr, UVic has a social responsibility to the community in which it exists. Café Scientifique is one way of giving back while informing the public of what the university’s researchers are up to.

Christie can only help. A gregarious, engaging speaker, Christie riffs informally for about 25 minutes after which he entertains questions for the next hour. During his research that began a decade ago at California’s Salk Institute, Christie was one of the scientists who found that mice, bearing a similar neurological make-up to humans, increased their brain capacity when they exercised every day. Experiments on rats were equally successful.

That’s good news for sufferers of Alzheimer’s and FASD. The latter is caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy, which can lead to brain damage. After exercising for just 12 days—several months in human terms—FASD-added rats were indistinguishable from rats without the symptoms, Christie says. Alzheimer’s sufferers’ symptoms were reduced by 50 per cent, although Christie cautioned that getting active won’t eliminate Alzheimer’s or FASD.

“Exercise won’t cure Alzheimer’s disease but it will slow the progression,” he says.

You don’t have to be an ultra-marathoner, either. A 20-minute walk three times a week is enough to keep the brain and body supplied. It’s a huge help for those suffering from some forms of depress.
sion too, as good as any medication, Christie says. “Housework and
gardening count too. Just get moving.”

That is great news for Adam Leuchter, 84. An avid hiker, the
retired electrical engineer gets out for a walk every day. Still,
Leuchter was sceptical going into Christie’s session. But after
grilling the scientist on whether there was contrary research—there
isn’t any—the fit octogenarian is satisfied that he’s on the right
track.

“I am 84. Aging is an important subject to me,” Leuchter says, with
a wide grin. “I was hoping to learn how I can continue to have my
brain function. Most people say the older you get the stupider you
get. It’s great that there’s a way of slowing it down.”

Leuchter doesn’t plan to slow down and he’s doing mind and
body good when he goes for his daily strolls.

Of course, just exercising won’t make you any brighter. You actu-
ally have to use that brain when you’re growing all those new neu-
rons. Crossword and sudoku puzzles are always a help, as are writ-
ing and practising music. Ballroom dancing is a terrific blend,
combining enormous mental discipline with physical activity.

A fit 45, Christie practises what he preaches, biking five kilometres
to work and back every day. He also runs about the same distance
three times a week. A life-long athlete, Christie found himself getting
soft during his days as a university student following a knee injury
during a volleyball game. Doing brain research “was a little bit of an
instigator to exercise. I had my knee rebuilt before I started this
research. The evidence is just too compelling and you want to get
active. I have felt more mental clarity and I have ramped it up the
last couple of years,” Christie says.

Dave Platt, 71, took in the talk with friend Carolyn Zyha. Platt lifts
weights three times a week, attends water fitness classes and hikes.
He loves the fact that anybody can follow through on Christie’s mes-
 sage. “It’s nice to have validation of what you are doing. What’s
heartening is that you don’t have to be training for a marathon.”

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**Ideas Served Right**

They call it their own version of “theatre of the mind.” The UVic
Centre for Biomedical Research introduced Café Scientifique last
fall, but the concept dates back to the salons of 19th century Paris. It
was revived in the 1990s by groups in the UK and France and has
since caught on elsewhere.

Locally, the informal seminars with UVic science and biomedical
researchers offer insight into health-related issues. Talks about
science are brought outside of the domain of the expert and allow
everyone to voice an opinion.

**Next up:**

“The Many Faces of Autism” with Psychology Prof. Jim Tanaka
Thursday, May 21 - 6:30 p.m.
Swans Suite Hotel, Collard Room

RSVP to cfbn@uvic or call: 250 472-4067
Web: cfbn.uvic.ca
Space is limited.