



Losers are winners

Brian Blakemore is one of many men who are shedding kilos in a weight loss competition by Rotary clubs, as **Amanda Saunders** reports

Brian Blakemore is a self-declared realist who has always called himself a “fat bastard”. The Dudley Brook man says he had been unmotivated about losing weight until he was introduced to a new program at his Rotary club last year — The Waist Disposal Challenge.

“I was 15 stone (95.5kg) when I was 16 years old, so I knew I was a big fat bastard who had to lose weight then,” the 59-year-old, who now weighs 138kg, says.

“But it didn’t happen until somebody convinced me this would be a sensible thing to do so I have eaten my humble pie and put up my hand to champion the cause and be in charge of it.”

And he has lost 10kg in two months.

Mr Blakemore, who started the program last October, wants to lose another 18 kilos to reach his 120kg target weight but refuses to give himself a timeframe.

“If I treated it any other way it would be a diet and a fad and I’d be tricking myself,” he says. “This is what I should be doing for the rest of my life.”

So what is it about this program, developed by community health researcher Samar Aoun, the director of Curtin University’s WA Centre for Cancer and Palliative Care, that is different from the countless other often unsuccessful and costly weight-loss initiatives floating around?

The formula is deceptively simple and evolved from a request from a bunch of Rotarians who attended one of Professor Aoun’s talks on men’s health.

They wanted to know how their clubs could lose weight as a group project and she came up with a solution — a competition between clubs, where the biggest loser, or one that most successfully reduces their collective BMI, wins.

So a year-long pilot program started in April 2007 with \$75,000 in Federal funding, for 780 members across 23 clubs in the Rotary district running from south of the river to Esperance.

Half the members lost weight.

At the outset about 88 per cent of the group — where the average age was 57 and range was 45 to 85 years — was overweight or obese, a figure Professor Aoun says reflects the wider population.

Health professionals gave seminars with simplified information on nutrition, exercise and lifestyle and each month the members’ BMI, height and waist, cholesterol, blood pressure and glucose level measurements were taken.

The third tier of the program was one-on-one phone counselling for members considered most at risk, where experts created a weight-loss program and monitored them over four or six sessions.

About 180kg were lost between the 15 clubs who stuck to the program, with Mandurah shedding 57kgs to take out the gong.

In response to the success of the pilot, the Federal Government granted \$200,000 for a larger program that started in June last year with one crucial difference — **champions**. Rather than health professionals dispensing advice, as

in the pilot program, one or two “champions” at each club were trained to lead the program.

“Men love to work in groups and be part of



West Australian

06-Jan-2010

Page: 6

Health

By: Amanda Saunders

Region: Perth

Circulation: 195211

Type: Australian Capital City Daily

Size: 591.30 sq.cms

Frequency: MTWTFS-



that collegiality, and Rotary members are about 90 per cent men," Professor Aoun says, with the latest program now including 1600 members from half of WA's 102 Rotary clubs. "Rotarians are already part of the community, are leaders in their fields, and have a social network built in so they are perfect for diffusing information about health."

Mr Blakemore is one of two champions who volunteered in the current program at Mandurah City Club, and monitors the monthly weigh-in as well as motivating the troops at presentations.

"I'm not telling them we have to win this competition but that we've got to reduce our BMI to live longer, that's enough motivation," he says, adding he puts out a weekly newsletter with health tips.

The advice he gives is simple — look out for the sugar that is buried in different foods, shakes and coffees; ensure you have magnesium so the calcium in your diet is properly absorbed; drink

large amounts of water and take in more foreboding facts, for example in 2006, for the first time in world history, more people died from obesity-related diseases than from malnutrition.

Mr Blakemore, who owns a hardware business in Mandurah, says that before the program walking around his store was the only real exercise he had done in his life. Although he avoids the gym because of the expense and cannot go on long walks because of his arthritic knees, he now exercises around the house for half an hour each day.

He works up a light sweat doing push-ups against the work bench, bending to touch his toes and punching his arms up in the air 80 times.

He also now declines the bread roll served with meals at Rotary, has downsized his coffee to a regular and cut back from five or so a day to one or two cups, has fresher food, more vegetables, makes juices, has cut meat consumption by a quarter and reduced his portion sizes by about

15 per cent. And beer consumption has been cut back.

"I've changed my dinner plate to a smaller one and when I'm eating food I put my fork down while I'm processing a mouthful," he says.

His work colleagues tell him his weight loss and lifestyle changes have mellowed him out and made him more positive. His partner can also sleep easier now that the weight loss stopped his snoring.

"I feel more confident not walking around with a great big gut anymore, because most of it has come off my stomach," he says.

Professor Aoun says that as well as weight loss, the Waist Disposal Challenge targeted people at risk of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

"I've outlived my dad by six years, he dropped stone dead from a massive heart attack," Mr Blakemore says. "I've always assumed I would die young but now I am convinced I'll live a lot longer than him."



Winning the battle:
Brian Blakemore.
Picture: John Makrzycki