

Doctor takes on taking pounds off

Medical Weight Loss Centers of Oregon is a new clinic on Coburg Road

*Story by Tim Christie
The Register-Guard
April 26, 2006*

Ever since he quit playing football and basketball at Tillamook High School, Eric Spencer has struggled with his weight. Spencer, an emergency room physician, is an inveterate dieter but nothing seemed to last — he lost 35 pounds on the Atkins Diet in eight weeks, and gained it back nearly as fast.

Then he heard about a diet program run by another doctor in Redding, Calif., named Raymond Powell. Last August, Spencer went down to Redding and joined Powell's program, weighing in at 257 pounds on his 6-foot-1 frame.

Today, Spencer checks in at about 218 pounds and he's trying to carve another 15 pounds off to get to his ideal weight. He was so impressed by Powell's program, he paid Powell to train him and now he's the medical director for Medical Weight Loss Centers of Oregon, a new clinic on Coburg Road.

Spencer, along with six other emergency physicians and a nurse-practitioner, use Powell's approach to weight loss. Each patient gets an individualized program, but many rely on an initial "jump start" by drastically cutting calories, in combination with exercise, medication and motivation.

The program starts with patients getting weighed on a high-tech scale, which calculates not just pounds but body fat and body mass index. The scale also determines a patient's daily caloric needs, which provides a baseline number.

Spencer takes that number and cuts it in half. So if a patient is burning 3,200 calories a day, he or she would be allotted 1,600 calories a day for the first part of the program, lasting two to six weeks, during which time patients come in to the clinic for weekly weigh-ins.

That patient would eat 200 calories every two or three hours, then a 600-calorie dinner. Patients get a calorie-counting book, and those 200-calorie meals can be protein bars or shakes, available from the clinic, or the patient's own food. If they use their own food, they have to keep a log, Spencer said.

It sounds austere, but it produces results, Spencer said.

"Dieters are motivated," he said. "People can deprive themselves. They have to have some deprivation. No weight loss plan is easy."

Eating small, frequent meals helps stave off hunger pangs, Spencer said, and speeds the body's metabolism and keeps fat cells burning.

Another key component of the program also helps keep food cravings at bay: Prescription drugs, which help suppress the appetite.

The aggressive "boot camp" approach helps patients lose weight fast, which reinforces their motivation, he said. Once patients approach a target weight, they transition to a maintenance program.

Exercise is encouraged, but the doctors do not make specific, rigorous recommendations, Spencer said.

“It’s a set-up for failure to tell someone how to exercise,” he said. Instead, he encourages patients to find ways to get moving, whether its taking a daily walk or taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

“Exercise by itself is not a great weight loss technique,” he said. “It’s very healthy, but it’s not a good diet plan. It’s a good thing as long as you’re sticking to the diet.”

The clinic charges \$150 for the first month, which includes an initial consultation, weigh-in, medications, and vitamins, then \$100 a month after that. Insurance companies typically don’t cover diet programs, but they will cover treatment of obesity-related ailments.

The new clinic is one of myriad weight loss programs out there for people who want to lose weight.

Weight loss is big business these days — Americans spend about \$46 billion a year on diet programs, diet foods, fitness programs, drugs and surgeries, according to Marketdata Enterprises, a market research and consulting firm in Tampa, Fla.

That’s due in no small part to the fact that so many of us need to lose weight.

Public health experts view obesity as a national epidemic in the United States. The most recent information from the National Center for Health Statistics shows that 30 percent of U.S. adults 20 and older — more than 60 million people — are obese. Among young people ages 6 to 19, 16 percent are considered overweight.

In Oregon, 37 percent of adults are overweight and 22 percent are obese, according to state health statistics.

Kaly Harward, a Eugene businessman, has struggled with his weight for years and last month started on Spencer’s program. Harward, who is 6-foot-1, started at 289 pounds and said he has lost 21 pounds. He is hopeful he’ll reach his goal of 215 pounds.

“It’s going very well,” he said. “I find the program very easy to follow. The set-up is such that you eat many times through out the day, so you’re never feeling starved or hungry. That’s one of the best aspects for me.”

He took the appetite suppressants the first week, but stopped because he didn’t think they doing anything for him. If he feels the need to break off the diet, he thinks about his children.

“I don’t want to be 350 pounds when they’re 14 years old and they want to play ball or go water-skiing,” he said.

