A Prescription for Good Health

Green prescriptions in action
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sir Peter Snell</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorry Governor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny Green</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Stu Hockey</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kira Kemp</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron Leathley</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn McColl</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahu Paurini</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiri Swayn</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Riwhi-Moihi and Tui Te Moananui</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorene Robinson</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Green Prescriptions have proven to be a highly effective and cost effective way of increasing physical activity over the last 14 years, making significant improvements to New Zealanders’ health.

We know that increased physical activity has so many benefits including prevention and better management of type 2 diabetes and reducing the impact of cardiovascular disease – two of the major targets for improving our population’s health.

A better ability to maintain a healthy weight, improved mental health, prevention of a range of significant illnesses and better mobility are among many other benefits of a more active lifestyle.

The robustness of the Green Prescription initiative is reflected in its proven success over many years. In this booklet we tell the stories of some of the people for whom a Green Prescription has improved not only their health but that of friends, family and in many cases their wider community.

Kevin Woods
Director-General of Health

What are Green Prescriptions?

A Green Prescription is a health professional’s written advice to a patient to become more physically active. Most scripts are issued for weight management, diabetes and heart disease. An increasing number are now given for mental health issues.

Green Prescriptions are available nationwide thanks to a partnership with general practice and funding from the Ministry of Health.

Research shows Green Prescriptions are an effective and cost effective way of increasing physical activity.

Green Prescriptions can be given to individuals, to families and to young people – particularly to inactive primary or intermediate school-aged children with weight problems – where establishing good habits early can deliver dividends later in life.

Eight out of every ten GPs have used Green Prescriptions. Up to 30,000 referrals are made each year for adults, and for 628 children and their families. Activity and nutritional advice is provided to families through weekly group sessions or home visits.

The Green Prescription scheme began in 1998 and is internationally recognised.

Regular evaluations show a consistently high level of patient satisfaction from both adults and families. Over the years this has been a very successful initiative with high visibility and consistently positive outcome evaluations.

How does it work?

A GP or practice nurse issues their patient with a Green Prescription, which is forwarded to a patient support person.

The support person encourages the patient to become more active through phone calls, face-to-face meetings or through a support group. The patient’s progress towards a more active lifestyle is reported back to their referrer and if the patient feels they would benefit from ongoing support they’re encouraged to ask their GP for another Green Prescription.
Sir Peter Snell

New Zealand sporting legend Sir Peter Snell has given his wholehearted endorsement to the Green Prescription programme, saying it is the envy of countries such as the United States that don’t have the same infrastructure to implement it.

Although best known in this country for his extraordinary running ability and gold-medal winning performances in the Rome and Tokyo Olympics of 1960 and 1964 respectively, Texas-based Sir Peter has also spent more than 40 years studying the benefits of exercise on the human body.

Sir Peter says that the closest anyone has come to a formula for immortality is regular daily exercise. And Sir Peter is convinced that general practitioners are in the best position to encourage people who are not used to exercising to first contemplate it and then start improving their levels of activity.

‘In a multi-study trial we conducted in Dallas, Stanford and Memphis, of more than 900 individuals, one-third improved their levels of exercise just on the basis of their doctor’s advice. With a Green Prescription, people get their doctor’s recommendation to exercise and then the extra support to help them stay motivated. There are also positive spin-offs for the rest of the community, particularly family and friends who see Green Prescription recipients out exercising.’

Sir Peter says there has been a lot of published research on the Green Prescription initiative, showing that it works in improving people’s health and is highly cost effective. ‘It is unique to New Zealand but has been acknowledged internationally as a very good programme. Here in America, people think it is a good idea, but they don’t have the organisations to support it. You need agencies like the Ministry of Health and advocates like Diana O’Neill to push such an initiative.’

Sir Peter says that with or without a Green Prescription, people should get out and start exercising. Much of his research has been about populations that are prone to diabetes and the benefits of exercise for these populations. ‘For most people, type 2 diabetes could be completely avoidable through exercise and good nutrition,’ he explains.

Sir Peter’s interest in the impact of exercise on the body has always had a personal element to it, but he says this interest has increased as he has aged. ‘I’m interested in my own mortality and want to have physical and mental independence until I die, whenever that might be. Obviously, not everyone can be successful in this endeavour, but you can enhance your chances by exercising.’

Despite osteoarthritis in his knees and a heart condition, 73-year-old Sir Peter cycles to and from work each day, takes the stairs to his ninth floor office, plays golf, gardens and participates in orienteering events. He says that, as you age, the body isn’t as forgiving, but it’s never too late to benefit from exercise. ‘Muscles still respond to exercise, which means resistance training is important in helping us maintain our strength as we get older.’

‘Most of us have pretty sedentary jobs now, and we need to be aware that we need to get out of our chairs and do something active every hour. Even if we have done ½ or ¾ of an hour’s exercise before work, sitting for the rest of the day is not good. You really need to be on your feet as much as you can.’
Lorry Governor's success on the Green Prescription programme and love of helping others have come together to the benefit of other Palmerston North people experiencing health problems.

Since completing his Green Prescription, Lorry has been enlisted by Sport Manawatu as one of the programme’s class mentors and now fits regular visits to Green Prescription meetings around his daily exercise and other activities.

It works well for Lorry, who has recently finished a Social Work degree but can’t work at the moment because of a painful knee.

‘I was given a Green Prescription after I put my back out a couple of times trying to exercise at home to improve my knee,’ Lorry explains. ‘I was in so much pain, I couldn’t even walk to the letterbox, but they assigned a Massey University practicum student to work with me. While a Green Prescription was unable to fix Lorry’s knee, it helped him shed 24 kilograms and reduce the pressure on the injury. Lorry’s increased exercise also brought his Type 2 diabetes under control, with his medication now at one tablet a day rather than eight.

‘At this rate, I won’t have to take any pills soon. My doctor can’t believe it,’ Lorry says.

‘My goal this year is to help people like me with a Green Prescription for conditions like diabetes and arthritis. I’m really passionate about it.’

Green Prescription co-ordinator Katrina Gemmell says, ‘Lorry is definitely a great role model for participants. Taking on the class mentor role means he gets the chance to talk to them about his journey so far: he can relate to many of them, and he can help them overcome their barriers.’

The improvements Lorry has made to his health have so impressed two of his grown children that they have started going to the gym, and Lorry is teaching them about good nutrition.

‘Like other Māori families, we enjoy a boil up, but they aren’t good for you unless you cut the fat off the meat, allowing the boil up to cool and then scraping the fat off the top. Do that, add the greens and it can be quite healthy.

‘I’m determined not to go back to where I was before,’ Lorry says. ‘Next Friday, my daughter is getting married, and I have bought a new $400 suit that just fits me. If I get any bigger, I will have wasted $400, and I’m not going to do that.’

As a mentor, he says he has heard some ‘amazing excuses’ for why people haven’t been exercising or eating well. ‘I just talk to them about what they are going to do from now on. I tell them about what I did, and we compare notes. It’s mainly about listening while people make their decisions.’

Lorry Governor’s success on the Green Prescription programme and love of helping others have come together to the benefit of other Palmerston North people experiencing health problems.
These days, Jenny Green’s husband and son may occasionally complain about fewer hot puddings and cake, but the family is fitter and healthier since Jenny was given a Green Prescription in 2010.

As well as reducing the amount of fat, salt and sugar in the family’s diet, Jenny’s increased exercise levels have inspired 15-year-old Tom to stay fit. Husband Martin, who was already very active, has also improved his health by walking with Jenny to support her.

Jenny says Tom, who is a kayaker, is slimmer and healthier than when she started on the Green Prescription, and he recently asked to bike the 12-kilometre route to school. ‘He used to catch the bus but says he needs more exercise to stay fit and healthy,’ Jenny explains. ‘When we asked him whether it was safe, he argued that I bike around our valley so why shouldn’t he?’

Before she received a Green Prescription, Jenny says she would make a pudding every night for the family – a fruit pie, crumble or lemon meringue pie – but she now generally stews whatever fruit is in season on their Motueka Valley lifestyle block. ‘I occasionally do a crumble but usually try to fill everyone up on three or four vegetables instead.’

Jenny’s Green Prescription came about in a rather unconventional way after she burst into tears at her medical centre on receiving a high cholesterol reading. ‘I was quite overweight and was getting virtually no exercise. The nurse had a long chat to me about how I needed to exercise every day. A few days later, out of the blue, I received a phone call about a Green Prescription,’ she recalls. ‘It was just what I needed. I really like the one-on-one approach. They ring you, or you can ring them, and you talk to someone who cares and will encourage you.’

Jenny says she would never have shed nearly 13 kilograms and kept her cholesterol at a manageable level, if she hadn’t started exercising more. ‘After putting in all that effort, I’m not going to waste it. If you eat cream cakes, you have to work twice as hard the next day.’

Jenny’s first goal was to walk 1.5 kilometres to her letterbox and back each day. She then began swimming once a week, increased her walking distance and finally started biking 18 kilometres each day. Even when she fell off her bike and had to reduce her exercise for a while she didn’t gain weight. ‘I still take a low dose anti-cholesterol tablet, but high cholesterol can be hereditary, and I have so far managed to avoid the stronger dose I was going to be given before I started the Green Prescription,’ Jenny says.

The other benefits Jenny is enjoying include finding that her clothes fit her better and that she is no longer ‘huffing and puffing’. ‘People have noticed that I’ve lost weight, including my two closest friends (who also want to lose weight). Hopefully I can help them and my family to stay healthier in the future.’

Jenny Green
Dr Stu Hockey

Being able to write prescriptions for his patients that don’t involve medication is one of the aspects of the Green Prescription that appeals most to Gisborne general practitioner Dr Stu Hockey.

‘I like the concept of giving people something holistic. And most people are very receptive to that idea, too,’ he says.

Before writing a Green Prescription, Dr Hockey carefully considers whether the person is going to be a good match for the programme. ‘I am selective about writing Green Prescriptions as they are not for everyone. I often touch on lifestyle changes with patients in passing. The people that genuinely say they want to lose weight and be more active generally benefit from the opportunity and the input from the Green Prescription team.’

Dr Hockey says that he writes about two or three Green Prescriptions a month, and the nurses in his practice’s diabetes clinic also write them as part of their regular follow-up with patients.

As well as being for people who are overweight or have conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, Green Prescriptions are regularly used to help people with depression become more physically active. ‘They seem to be particularly good for men with depression who need that motivation to burn some energy,’ Dr Hockey says.

While some of his patients haven’t been able to maintain the lifestyle changes from their Green Prescription, Dr Hockey says that he has witnessed some exciting success stories. ‘One lady who I had seen for many years shed 40 kilograms while on a Green Prescription. It was as if a light suddenly went on for her.’

Dr Hockey also currently has high hopes for a patient who was turned down for knee surgery because of his weight and has managed to make major improvements to his weight and health through a Green Prescription.

‘As a GP, encouraging people to get more exercise and eat the right things is a bit like telling them to stop smoking. Something like only 5 percent of people will take action as a result of our prompting. The Green Prescription, however, offers the extra support that both health professionals and patients need for lifestyle changes to happen,’ Dr Hockey says.

‘Nutritional advice is an important part of the assistance people receive, and it is a great help for people. It is certainly much more than a doctor can provide in a 10- to 15-minute conversation.’

Dr Hockey also values the links other health providers have with Green Prescriptions. ‘Cardiac rehab, for example, is closely aligned to it, as is our closest Māori health provider, and they, in turn, are linked to other providers who can all help to support people in the lifestyle changes they need to make.’

A Prescription for Good Health: Green Prescriptions in action
After losing 20 kilograms in the three months since he started his Green Prescription, Kira Kemp is now encouraging other members of his family to start swimming and improve their health.

‘I have two brothers-in-law who are both big boys, and since I’ve been on the Green Prescription, I have been encouraging them to come aqua jogging with me. The rest of my family, even my cheeky thin brother, want to come too,’ he says.

Kira’s efforts to improve his health have received the wholehearted support of his family, particularly his wife who has helped him overhaul his diet. ‘I’ve really had to change what I eat. Now I can’t handle fish and chips and can’t stand pies, which I used to eat daily. I still eat meat and seafood but have lots of fruit and vegetables as well,’ he says. ‘The nutritional advice that I received from the dietician [as part of the Green Prescription] was just magic.’

Kira has also welcomed the support he has received from Northland Green Prescription coordinator Merran Brockie and the fitness team at his local swimming pool. ‘Merran has been really excited by the progress I’ve made, and the people at the pool are always full of enthusiasm and encourage me every time I go.’

Kira’s health and weight issues have meant that he has not been able to work for a year. His weight continued to increase after he stopped work and, at 144 kilograms, his doctor wrote him a Green Prescription. ‘I had diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and a lot of pain in my knees,’ he recalls.

Since starting on a Green Prescription, Kira has been told that he doesn’t need his asthma medication, has been able to halve the number of pills he takes and, just as this article was being written, was given a clearance by his doctor to return to work. At 54 years of age, Kira says that he has also started seeing himself in a different light. ‘I have always admired people who jog and used to think I’d really like to do that, but even the thought of a long walk never entered my mind. Before the Green Prescription, I could only do 5-minute bursts.’

These days, Kira visits his local swimming pool three to four times a week and is looking at how he can continue to exercise when he returns to work.

‘The freedom of aqua jogging is really awesome stuff, and one day, I’d like to get back to proper jogging like I did years ago. It’ll be hard continuing to exercise when I go back to work but there’s no going back now.’

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It’s easy to appreciate the benefits of a Green Prescription for Ron Leathley, but dig a little deeper, and you can see the positive spin-offs of his healthier lifestyle on his children, granddaughter and the wider community.

In early 2011, 58-year-old Ron was working about 100 hours a week driving trucks in Northland. He was tired, overweight and felt unwell most of the time. Then, in February, he had a stroke while driving.

Ron spent four days in Auckland Hospital, during which time his daughter told him his life needed to change. ‘She just said, “That’s it; you’re coming back to Christchurch to be with us”,’ Ron recalls.

After discovering that Ron also had type 2 diabetes, his new Christchurch doctor, like his Whangarei GP, suggested he have a Green Prescription, and this time Ron was ready to take it up. ‘Coming down to Christchurch, I realised I really wanted to be around for my nine-year-old granddaughter Tre and the rest of my family for as long as possible,’ he explains.

Ron cycled to his first meeting with Amanda from Sport Canterbury and since then has embraced the new information provided to him and the range of opportunities to improve his health. As part of the Green Prescription, he took part in Canterbury’s Be Active programme, participating in group exercise classes, learning to cook, discovering what to eat for his diabetes and finding out about the benefits of an active mind.

Ron admits that Canterbury’s June 2011 earthquake set him back a bit, but his increased exercise and the friends that he made through the Green Prescription helped him get back on track. ‘I’d stopped smoking completely for five weeks before June and then started again. It was a hard time, but I’d get together with everyone for a giggle and a laugh and it would all disappear.’

Since then, Ron has graduated from the Green Prescription to lead a Monday morning walking group of eight people. ‘I’d got on well with everyone on the Green Prescription because I’m a bit of a cheeky fella, and Amanda helped me set up this walking group. Some of the people are at home, others are retired, but we all have similar medical problems, and our doctors have told us we need to be active.’

Even though Ron was about to go back to work when this article was written, he said he wanted to continue to make time for the group. ‘I like it because of the camaraderie and the chance to talk to people. My daughter Ngaire comes too.’

Ron says he is down to smoking four cigarettes a day, has lost 9 kilograms and has ‘learnt not to worry so much about problems.’ He is also putting his new-found cooking skills to use, cooking healthy meals and snacks for himself and other members of the family whenever he can. Pasta and vegetables, smoothies and rice risotto are now some of his specialties that he shares with his daughters and granddaughter Tre.

‘For the future, I want to get fitter, lose some more weight, get back to work and be around for a long, long time for my family,’ he says.
At her family reunion in 2012, 67-year-old Evelyn McColl will be leading an aerobics class and her brother a tae kwon do session.

These activities are all part of this Green Prescription recipient’s efforts to get her Tongan family moving and reduce the risks of their hereditary heart disease and high cholesterol.

Evelyn’s doctor originally gave her a Green Prescription in 2004 because of her family history and high blood pressure. For the first time in her life, Evelyn went to the gym and, although shy, began to participate in aerobics classes. ‘My Green Prescription support person Bradley and the staff at the gym were fantastic, and I was really getting to like it,’ she says.

Sadly, a few months down the track, it was discovered that Evelyn had cancer. After removing a tennis-ball-sized tumour, doctors told Evelyn that her outlook wasn’t good and she should make the most of the time she had left. ‘I said that I’m going to be fine. I had to keep living for the sake of my boys who had just lost their father,’ she explains. ‘I asked the people at church to pray for me.’

After a year of trying to stay as well as she could – eating healthily and getting plenty of sleep – Evelyn’s doctors told her there was no cancer to be found. In 2006, her GP offered her another Green Prescription, and Evelyn has used it to improve not only her own health but also that of hundreds of people in her local community.

At the time of writing this article, Evelyn is a Green Prescription coordinator at Mt Roskill and teaches six or seven aerobics and aqua aerobics classes in her neighbourhood each week. She says she hasn’t had a cold or the flu since the hospital gave her the all clear and is very glad of it because it would have meant missing her classes.

‘If you want to be a good role model, you have to be there for people and encourage them a lot,’ she explains. ‘To look after myself, I have to be disciplined, and I tell the people in my classes that you can’t do that by eating fish and chips, drinking Coca-Cola and sitting around all day. We have lots of laughs.’

Evelyn’s extended family visit her often, and she encourages them to eat healthily and exercise plenty. ‘If we have afternoon tea, I share what I make and show them that, even if you are having cake, there are healthy variations. I send the grandchildren outside to run around, and it means that we adults get some exercise chasing after them. Even if you’re at home all day, there is plenty that you can do to stay active,’ she concludes.
When Rahu Paurini’s doctor told him that he would need to start taking insulin unless he made some radical lifestyle changes, the 45-year-old father of four decided it was now or never if he was going to improve his health.

‘I went away and sat on the beach and asked myself why I was being so inconsistent about my health – saying the right things but not doing anything. The way I was heading, I was going to end up on dialysis watching my kids from above rather than being with them as they grew up.’

Rahu asked for a second Green Prescription, having failed to continue his first one after the death of a friend. This time, he decided to take a stronger approach, cutting out sugary foods and junk food and replacing them with plenty of fresh vegetables, fruit and lots of water. He also dusted down the treadmill that the family had been using as a clothes horse and began exercising six days a week for 30 minutes at increasing intensity.

As Rahu stays at home to look after the children while his wife Noeleen works, his new eating and exercise habits had to fit in with his work at home, caring for the children and feeding his family.

‘Rather than cooking special foods for me, I got a healthy cookbook and began making healthier kai for everyone, even for the kids’ lunch boxes,’ he explains.

‘My wife says that I am a great example, and if I can do it, then she can too. She is now very keen to eat healthily, get more exercise and lose some excess weight. My whole whānau can see my determination and are much more motivated to exercise now,’ he says.

Rahu’s increased exercise and improved diet have paid off in reducing his blood glucose levels from the high teens to within the normal range at around five or six. He says that his success wouldn’t have been possible without the support he received from Sport Northland’s Green Prescription coordinator Merran Brockie and others in his community.

‘I joined a “biggest loser” competition with 21 other people in the community, including my wife. We were in the competition for 10 weeks and, using the support I had from Green Prescription, I lost 9 kilograms.’ Rahu regained a couple of kilograms at Christmas, but he is confident that he will be able to lose them again. ‘A lot of it is about how much you treat yourself. My wife and I occasionally reward ourselves with a treat but not all the time now.’

Along with completing a fun run later in the year, Rahu’s goals for 2012 include passing on his newfound knowledge to others in his community. ‘I also hope people will read this article and take it on board. Part of the key to success is just to change your way of thinking,’ he says.
I could have helped my mother live longer if I had been able to tell her what I know now," says Green Prescription recipient Kiri Swayn.

Since receiving a Green Prescription, Kiri, who has had type 2 diabetes since she was a teenager, has lost more than 55 kilograms, significantly reduced her blood sugar levels and is now mentoring other Green Prescription recipients.

Fifty-one year old Kiri says that her mother, who died with type 1 diabetes at the age of 70, didn’t know what to do to improve her own health. 'I’d take her to the doctor’s, and the dietitian would tell her off, and she’d cry. We just weren’t given the right information or support back then,’ Kiri recalls.

When Kiri’s own weight hit 155 kilograms several years ago, her doctor told her she was at risk of a heart attack and her heart could give up at any time. 'It was a wake-up call. I had promised my mum before she died that I would lose the weight and wouldn’t end up on insulin, and my family kept reminding me of that.’

In 2001, after being made redundant from her job, Kiri decided to take some time out to improve her health. She began exercising every day, but it wasn’t until she stumbled upon a Green Prescription nutrition class at the gym that she began to experience rewards. 'I asked if I could join, and they welcomed me in but said I needed a Green Prescription to come again. My doctor happily wrote one for me, and the Green Prescription support people gave me a call.

'It was the education about food that I really needed. I’d been big since I was a teenager, filling up on the wrong foods – donuts, Mallow Puffs – when I would have done better eating a sandwich. Nobody wants to change, but I had to do it. I’ve now got a sign on my bedroom ceiling that says “once on the lips, forever on the hips”.

Kiri says that her advocacy for people with diabetes is well known in her community. As well as working with her local Green Prescription team, she is a paid aqua-aerobics instructor, a supporter of the New Zealand Kidney Foundation and a leader at self-management education workshops at the Mangere Family Doctors. ‘Wherever I go, people want to talk to me about what I did and how they can make changes to their health. My main piece of advice to them is to keep asking questions and to stay focused on your health. Don’t look right or left, keep going straight ahead until you reach your goals.’

Exercise and healthy eating are now part of everyday life for Kiri and her family. Kiri’s partner Leo used to be overweight, but eating better food and taking daily walks with Kiri have reduced the risk of the heart problems that are common in his family.

‘At home, we’ve radically changed what we eat. No foods are bad, but you just need to eat the ones that are better for you most of the time. The only member of the family that I’m worried about now is the dog, who is eating all of our leftovers,’ Kiri laughs.
Andrew Riwhi-Moihi and Tui Te Moananui

It is hard to imagine a better story to promote the benefits of a Green Prescription than that of Northland couple, Andrew Riwhi-Moihi and Tui Te Moananui.

When interviewed, this energetic, effervescent couple had, less than two years earlier, been plagued by health issues that were heavily impacting on their lives.

Tui, aged 40, was the first in the family to receive a Green Prescription when she visited Whangaroa Health Services following the birth of the couple’s sixth child Neveah. Suffering from depression and low self-esteem, Tui felt that she also needed to lose her post-baby weight to be healthier for her children. She wasn’t long into her prescription before she realised that her husband Andrew, who had type 2 diabetes, was overweight and had high blood pressure, also needed to be taking part.

At the time, 39-year-old Andrew says he had been working 20 years as a truck driver ‘eating pies, drinking fizzy drinks and spending hours and hours on my butt each day’.

Andrew’s general practitioner happily gave Andrew a Green Prescription and with extra encouragement from diabetes nurse Hana Johanson and Green Prescription coordinator Hillary Sheard, the couple set to work on improving their health.

‘The first thing we did with Hillary was to look at our diet, swapping blue top milk for green, white bread for brown, cutting out sugar and eating lots and lots of vegetables,’ Tui explains. ‘At the same time as starting at the gym, we began setting up our own vegetable garden.’

Andrew says he was brought up in Otara, Auckland, and his family didn’t grow their vegetables. ‘In Kaeo [22 kilometres northwest of Kerikeri in Northland], my family can live almost entirely off the vegetables we grow and the pipi, cockles, kina . . . that we catch. There are no fizzy drinks, but the kids are loving it, and the good food and exercise mean that Tui and I have so much more energy for the kids,’ he says.

With Andrew now working fewer hours and baby Neveah and her sisters at the local kohanga reo until 3 pm, the couple are able to exercise together each day, taking a circuit class with Hillary at their small local fitness centre and then using the gym to complete their workout with a bike, run or walk.

‘We just love it,’ Tui says. ‘It was hard to start with. It felt like a waste of time, but we kept going. I used to be depressed, and I didn’t feel good about myself, but it’s brought me out of my shyness,” she says.
The results for Andrew have also been life changing. Since starting the Green Prescription, he has lost 22 kilograms and has reduced his blood pressure as well as the amount of diabetes medication he needs to take. ‘My breathing problems have gone now: there’s no snoring, and I sleep much better. I used to need a nap during the day, but I don’t do that anymore,’ Andrew says.

‘We have a better way of life now, and we want to do as much as we can. In March this year, we want to do a triathlon at Kaitaia. I wouldn’t have thought of doing anything like that before; I was just abusing myself. I don’t drink any more either. It’s not worth it. It’s all about the kids now.’

Tui says that Andrew has been encouraging his brother and friends to start exercising, too. ‘They’ve seen what Andrew’s done, and they think, “Yeah, maybe I could do that too”.’

Andrew’s advice to anyone who is offered a Green Prescription is to give it a go. ‘The changes won’t happen overnight, but it’s so worth it,’ he says. ✴

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After shifting from Sydney to Whangarei to be near her son, 85-year-old Dorene Robinson found that, for the first time in her life, she had nothing to keep her physically active or connected to people.

Feeling low, she visited her general practitioner who suggested a Green Prescription to help boost her activity levels and her involvement in her community.

‘I’d originally wanted to go swimming but with the support of the Green Prescription team ended up doing t’ai chi,’ Dorene explains. Eighteen months on, and the sparkle is back in Dorene’s eye. She is still doing t’ai chi as well as playing croquet four days a week, tending more and more of the garden around her village apartment and doing plenty of walking to and from her sports.

‘The Green Prescription was such a good thing to do, and the people have been wonderful. They ring you to ask what you have been doing and if you are achieving what you wanted. The doctor says I’m one of his fittest patients,’ she boasts.

Dorene is now using her infectious love of life and activity to encourage others to get on their feet and improve their health. ‘I’ve been trying to get my neighbours out walking regularly and have been starting them off with circuits around the village. Some people always have an excuse, but I’ll keep encouraging them,’ she says.

Old age is definitely no excuse for not exercising according to Dorene. A couple of decades ago, she was among 17 people aged over 65 who walked the length of New Zealand.

‘It was a long way, but some of us wanted to turn around and walk right back again as soon as we’d finished. I’ve always been very sporty and despite my age am still very active. It’s so important for staying healthy, along with eating good plain food and not smoking or drinking.’ ✴