

From Province House to Home: Heartland Tour promotes heart health, one ride at a time

Published on July 30, 2014



Leo Glavine

Dr. Nick Giacomantonio is a role model. He is a cardiologist, the director of cardiovascular prevention and rehabilitation, and professor of medicine at Dalhousie University. In 2007, he started the Heartland Tour to help improve the health of Nova Scotians and, in effect, to prevent us from becoming his patients. The Heartland Tour is a public awareness bike tour across Nova Scotia that draws awareness to cardiovascular diseases and motivates us to reduce its risk factors.

The incidence of cardiovascular disease (heart disease) is decreasing in the rest of Canada, but it is still the leading cause of death in Nova Scotia. Dr. Giacomantonio is trying to change that. He has recognized the need to teach people about cardiovascular disease and about the need to adopt a healthy, active lifestyle to avoid its associated risk factors: inactivity, smoking, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He has taken his message on the road, on his bike. Dr. Giacomantonio and his core group of organizers practice what they believe and inspire and empower others to do the same. They encourage entire families to participate and reverse the trends that lead to strokes and heart attacks.

Many provincial, municipal and local associations also promote active living in Nova Scotia. There are activities for people of all ages and ability levels, including for those with restricted mobility. Programs are available through Healthy Kids Active Kids, Nova Scotia Healthy Living and Active Seniors, among many others.

While researchers and policy makers worldwide endeavour to mitigate general factors that diminish the overall health of certain populations, individuals like Dr. Giacomantonio are targeting specific risk factors that affect our health.

Moderate, sustained physical activity will lower the incidence of all causes of medical

deaths in Nova Scotia. In fact, physical activity can be as effective as medication, in certain circumstances. The Kids Run Club and Girls-only Run Club organized by Doctors Nova Scotia are other examples of medical professionals motivating Nova Scotians to be active. And six-time Olympian and Canadian champion Clara Hughes has taken her message about mental health on the road, across the entire country. Dr. Giacomantonio and these inspirational leaders share a common goal – improving our health – through a common medium, physical activity.

This year, the Heartland Tour Nova Scotia travelled to seven different communities across our province. These tours are made possible by the dedication and creative efforts of many local volunteers. The morning after tropical storm Arthur, I met up with the Heartland Tour in Yarmouth, where we learned about heart disease, our individual stroke risk, nutrition and cycling safety.

For cyclists:

1. Always wear an approved, properly fitted and secured helmet;
2. Follow the same rules of the road as drivers; the Motor Vehicle Act applies to cyclists, too.
3. Use a bike lane when possible
4. Use hand signals and drive defensively
5. Ride in single file on the right side of the road.

For Drivers: (remember that cyclists are helping to decrease our healthcare costs. Treat them with respect)

1. Leave at least one meter between the vehicle and the cyclist. If it is not safe to pass, slow down and drive behind the cyclist until it is. This is the law.
2. Follow the rules of the road. Cyclists have as much right to the road as motorized vehicles.
3. Be aware that cyclists have to merge with traffic to make left-hand turns.

The camaraderie, good food and motivation at the Yarmouth tour was exciting. I was loaned a bike and helmet, and I sported a cycling shirt that made me feel more like a seasoned cyclist than I really was. What role models! Thanks to Dr. Giacomantonio and all involved in the Heartland Tour in Yarmouth, I have been empowered to make cycling an integral part of my active lifestyle. The lighthouse leg of the tour was the beginning of my own cycling journey.

My hope is that every child in our province will learn to ride a bike and continue some level of riding for a lifetime. That would really transform our population's health.