

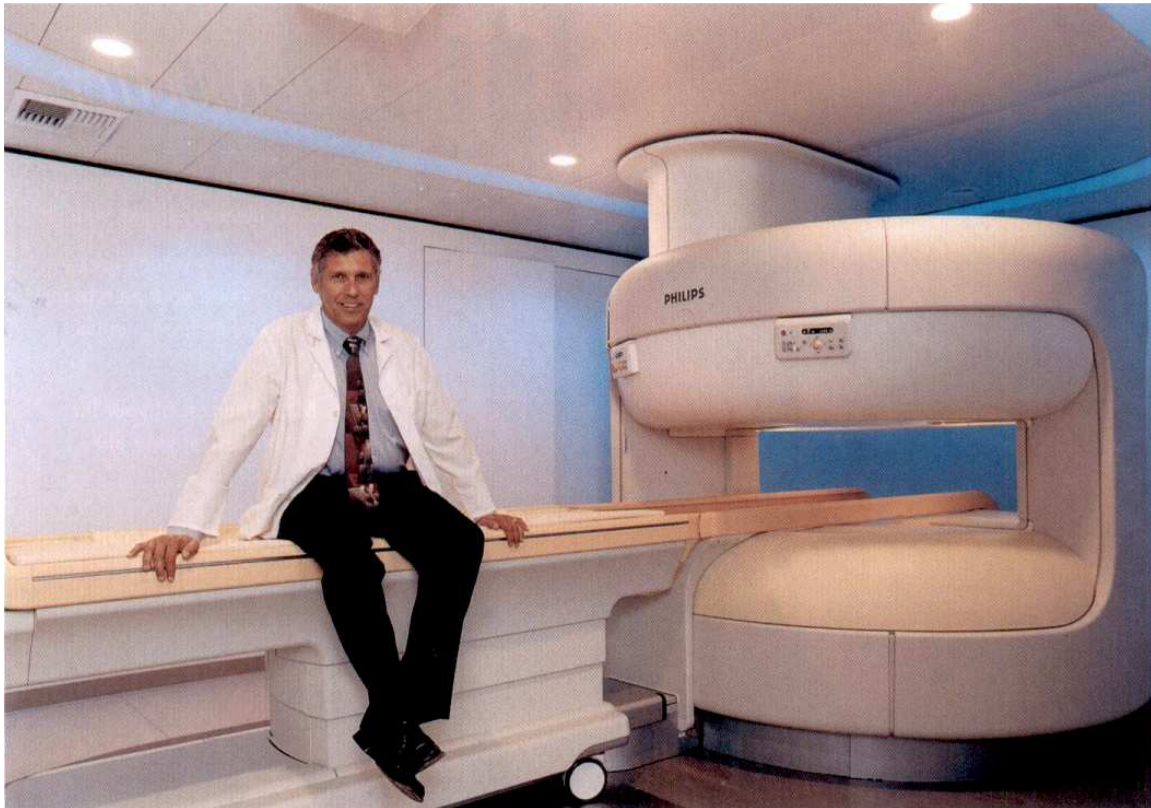
# SPAFINDER

THE GLOBAL SPA RESOURCE

IN PROFILE – DR. DANIEL COSGROVE

## Let's really get physical

DR. DANIEL COSGROVE TAKES THE EXECUTIVE CHECKUP  
TO THE WELLNESS MAX BY GARY WALTHER



Had Daniel Cosgrove, M.D., coined the line, man would be the measurer of all things. Especially where it concerned his body's chemistry and critical functions. "If it matters, measure it." is his mantra.

Dr. Cosgrove is the founder and medical director of the WellMax Center for Preventive Medicine in Palm Springs, California, and the driving force behind its hallmark service: the Platinum Physical. It's not just ultra-thorough; it looks at relationships outside (sometimes far outside) the usual checkup repertoire. It's a cavalcade of 200 to 500 measurements, from high-tech ultrasound artery and liver scans to no-tech flexibility routines (leg raise, deep squat); from standard treadmill stress measurements to an avant-garde one for myeloperoxidase, an enzyme that may be a heart-attack predictor; from a battery of cognitive

tests to a genetic analysis that focuses on aberrations in coding that can inhibit detoxification. And if you're of Irish or Scottish descent, Dr. Cosgrove may test you for hemochromatosis ("the Celtic curse"), a genetic predisposition to absorb more iron than needed, which can result in accelerated aging. (It's the result of a gene mutation that originated more than 40,000 years ago to compensate for the iron-deficient diet in these regions.)

You depart WellMax with a new piece of carry-on: a six-pound binder with results, explanations, tables, pictures, and graphs. (You also get the information on a computer USB stick, which, come to think of it, should be in your carry-on, too.) "It is one of the most thorough and comprehensive reports I have ever seen," says Mantu Gupta, M.D., the director of the Kidney Stone Center at New York Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan, who had a WellMax patient referred to him. "WellMax is one of the Cadillacs of executive-physical programs," says Miles Varn, the chief medical officer of Pinnacle Care, a health-and-wellness concierge service. Varn works with 20 such programs around the country so he's in a position to know, and he cites the spectrum of advanced medical technology that WellMax has in-office or nearby as one of its major strengths.

Like all physicals, the Platinum Physical looks hard at the present- for symptoms of disease- but Dr. Cosgrove's real interest lies in predicting and forestalling illness and processes that lead to it. "You know my method," says Sherlock Holmes in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*. "It is founded upon the observation of trifles." In like manner, Dr. Cosgrove is ever on the prowl for risk markers, genetic and physical indicators of vulnerability or predisposition to a particular disease. He attends research conferences such as one held by the Society for Free Radical Biology and Medicine- it's concerned with oxidative stress, not left-wing doctors- just to ferret out possible new markers and tests. The relationship he's tracking are often below the current medial radar because right now they're correlations, coincidences, and even his own hunches, like the one between low bone density and prostate cancer. "It's relationships that matter," he says, "An item can be in the reference range, yet the relationship can spell trouble."

Knowing all this in advance, I expect Dr. Cosgrove to be Mr. Spock with a tricorder. He turns out to be just the opposite- genial, gregarious, garrulous. A *Vogue* writer said Dr. Cosgrove has "game show good looks"- his gray hair and quick smile must have called to mind Alex Trebek- but he reminds me more of Dick Van Dyke as Rob Petrie. The first morning, he lopes into the conference room (without tripping over a chair) with retriever enthusiasm and just starts talking- bobbing and weaving, circling and digressing, looping back and picking up the conversational thread. He's not evasive. Rather, I get the feeling that he likes to saunter down every avenue of thought that presents itself lest he overlook something. His favorite expression: "To make a long story medium..."



The road to WellMax began with Dr. Cosgrove's disillusionment with the way economics was affecting- he would say degrading- medical care. He worked in Palm Springs' Desert Hospital emergency room for 11 years (1986 to 1997). It was the antithesis of WellMax- reactive rather than proactive; an episode, not a process. "A lot of people doing a lot of superficial, crappy medicine" is how he recalls it now. Dr. Cosgrove was always at the top of the patients-per-hour rankings, but he felt that his success came at the expense of his patients. His impulse was to spend more time with each one. "What else could I have done for this patient?" he kept asking himself. That became the cornerstone of the WellMax approach.

At the same time, Dr. Cosgrove was pursuing a hobby, buying Palm Springs real estate, which he thought was very undervalued. "I was having fun driving around with the top down with maps and title rolls," he recalls. "And I didn't trust the stock market." In 1998, using the money he'd made in land, he launched WellMax and, in 2000, moved the office to the shopping arcade of the venerable La Quinta Resort & Club. The hotel has been here since 1926 and for decades was a Hollywood hideaway, a favorite



of Greta Garbo and, in the words of Frank Capra, “the kind of place everyone was looking for.” (He wrote some of his best scripts here, including *It Happened One Night*.)

Given his emphasis on measurement, I’m surprised when Dr. Cosgrove tells me that taking down patient history is the most important thing he does. I confess that the first morning I actually get impatient at the leisurely pace- I’m eager to get to the techno side of the process- but Dr. Cosgrove carries on making notes and sometimes turning his head to the side and squinting when considering a piece of information, as though he were sizing up a slippery suspect. (“He’s got the art of medicine down to a science,” Varn says.)

It’s exactly Dr. Cosgrove’s looking hard at trifles that saved the life of one WellMax client, a guy in his late 40s who looked great, had fine cholesterol levels, and, says Dr. Cosgrove, “kicked butt on the treadmill stress test.” The man’s EKG was fine, as were his C-reactive protein levels, an indicator of arterial inflammation and a very good predictor of heart attacks, even better than cholesterol level. And that’s as far as most physicals would have taken him. WellMax, however, goes farther, using carotid-artery imaging, the gold standard, to measure plaque buildup. It bore out something that troubled Dr. Cosgrove on the fellow’s medical history: the bypass surgery his mother had in her late 50s. The imaging revealed accelerated atherosclerosis- the guy was in the 92<sup>nd</sup> percentile, in fact. The subsequent genetic test showed that the disease was the result of a gene variation, which is why his standard measurements were normal.

It’s when you invite him to talk about markers that the geeky side of Dr. Cosgrove emerges- but leavened with a gee-whiz enthusiasm. “I love scatter graphs,” he says, pushing one under my nose, “because I used to be fooled by curves.” (A scatter graph displays each point of data separately rather than emphasizing the group pattern as a curve does.) He terms myeloperoxidase “a cool marker,” and he’s big on the amino acid homocysteine as a predictor of heart disease, even though the jury is still out. “I recently saw a patient who had a bypass a few years ago,” Dr. Cosgrove recalls. “His homocysteine was 29- optimal is less than 9. I obtained his old records, and apparently nobody ever measured it. We quickly brought it under 10.” (Homocysteine levels are easily reduced with B vitamins.)

The cascade of results you get at WellMax can have a funny appeal to your vanity: I’m special because I have high levels of this or that, say catechol-o-methyltransferase. (It’s an enzyme that clears away adrenaline, among other things, once a threat has passed.) In my case, one such result is comical- a surplus of testosterone (in a guy who’s apathetic to most he-man pursuits). When broken down in the body, it produces a substance that can lead to an enlarged prostate. It’s easy to fix once identified, but no physical I’ve had even looked for it. As Dr. Cosgrove says, “We find something important in almost everybody.”

What has me on edge, thought, is the Genovations gene panel. My father died of heart disease at age 57 (I’m 55), and my mother at age 70. I’ve spent more than a decade running (literally) against what I saw as a genetic deck stacked against me, a race that can’t be won, only lengthened. Dr. Cosgrove had been admirably frank when I mentioned this in an e-mail before I arrived.

“Writers sometimes arrive at WellMax like someone who has just challenged a hypnotist at a party, not fully appreciating the potential seriousness of the event. The WellMax experience brings you face-to-face with your mortality. You become poignantly aware of the vulnerability of your physical body.”

And also of its resilience. I’m now getting the payoff for all that treadmill time. Dr. Cosgrove terms my cardiovascular health superb for my age and very good for any age.



But- why is there always a but?- my LDL (bad) cholesterol is a bit high. It's not dietetic but genetic. "Your cholesteroleser-transfer protein is a one-armed sweeper," says Dr. Cosgrove in a moment of unintended levity, referring to the enzyme that clears LDL from the blood.

If anything illustrates the purpose of WellMax- to pinpoint "modifiable risk factors" so that the patient can optimize his own health- it's this bit of knowledge. It doesn't resign me to my fate but renews my determination to minimize the chance of meeting it. And it recalls a little exchange Dr. Cosgrove and I had over lunch the day before when I expressed anxiety about the gene-panel results.

"You can't escape your genetic fate," I said, darkly. "Yeah, you can," Dr. Cosgrove shot back. "I intend to be living proof of that."