

**Lifestyle Medicine: A Patient-Centered Approach for Modern Healthcare.
Introducing ELMO, the European Lifestyle Medicine Organization.**

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The Patient Who Changed My Perspective

“The conversation took place one afternoon in a university clinic with a patient who was alone in her room.

She had all the medical diagnoses that we most often associate with lifestyle-related disease: obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia.

The discussion began with a medical history and physical examination, but at some point, the patient's main problem became clear.

She was a woman in her early fifties whose greatest challenge was her excess weight and the vicious cycle in which she found herself.

She was ashamed of the episodes during which she could not control her appetite and of the fact that she did not know how to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

At the same time, physicians often reprimanded her because they believed she was doing nothing to change her situation.

The vicious cycle was simple: the worse she felt, the more she ate. At one point during our conversation, she burst into tears, and I watched helplessly.

I did not know what to say because, deep down, I also blamed her.

Why was she not doing anything to lose weight and thereby prevent the complications of obesity? Yet when she asked me, “Doctor, what should I do? How should I eat differently? What kind of exercise should I do? What else can I do to lose weight?” I could offer only a few clichés.

I did not know how to answer because, beyond making a medical diagnosis and prescribing medication, I had learned very little else in medical school.

Of course, I knew that prevention was important, particularly through diet and physical activity. However, like many physicians fresh out of medical school, I had no real understanding of how to prescribe nutritional interventions, what type of physical activity to recommend, how much of it, at what intensity, or whether there were other evidence-based recommendations for healthy living.

I knew almost nothing about the fact that lifestyle interventions can be a treatment in themselves, or an essential part of treatment, for chronic lifestyle-related diseases.

This experience occurred ten years ago.

Later, through an introductory course at Harvard University, I discovered the concept of Lifestyle Medicine and learned that lifestyle interventions are grounded in science.

Why Chronic Disease Demands a New Medical Paradigm

Healthcare systems worldwide are facing a rapid rise in chronic non-communicable diseases, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, fatty liver disease, and metabolic syndrome affecting both older and younger populations. While pharmacological therapies remain essential, they often target

disease outcomes rather than the behavioral and environmental drivers. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive and preventive model of care.

Noncommunicable diseases are largely driven by modifiable behavioral risk factors, including unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and harmful alcohol consumption. The World Health Organization estimates that up to 80% of premature heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes could be prevented through modification of these risk factors. Recent mortality statistics from Eurostat indicate that cardiovascular diseases and cancer account for the majority of deaths in the European Union, while WHO Europe identifies noncommunicable diseases as the dominant cause of premature mortality and disability across the region. Because many of the major risk factors for these conditions are modifiable, including tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and harmful alcohol consumption, prevention and lifestyle-based interventions represent key public health priorities.

Lifestyle Medicine: The Science of Prevention and Treatment

The European Lifestyle Medicine Organization (ELMO), based on the work of the ELMO Scientific Council (<https://www.eulm.org/what-is-lifestyle-medicine/>), defines Lifestyle Medicine as:

“A branch of medicine which has as goal to maintain optimal health and to prevent, treat and reverse chronic illness across all life stages.

The health interventions used in lifestyle medicine include evidence-based behavioral strategies, while considering equity and sustainability, to enhance self-management skills for optimizing nutrition, sleep hygiene, stress management, social connection, sexual health and fertility, physical activity and minimizing substance use and environmental exposures.”

Through structured, evidence-based interventions, patients can improve health outcomes, reduce disease risk, and in some cases achieve remission of chronic conditions.

Lifestyle Medicine aims to serve as the foundation of health and healthcare, and its principles are reflected in many other medical approaches:

- **Conventional medicine:** lifestyle interventions are frequently included in clinical guidelines as first-line treatments for many chronic diseases.
- **Preventive medicine:** public health recommendations closely align with Lifestyle Medicine pillars such as physical activity, nutrition, and avoidance of harmful substances.
- **Integrative medicine:** emphasizes a whole-person approach and often incorporates Lifestyle Medicine principles.
- **Mind-body medicine:** explores how lifestyle factors influence both mental and physical health.
- **Functional medicine:** uses personalized approaches to address root causes of disease, often through lifestyle-related interventions.
- **Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM):** takes a holistic view of health and frequently includes lifestyle-based strategies.

Lifestyle Medicine: From Origins to The European Lifestyle Medicine Organization (ELMO)

The concept of Lifestyle Medicine originated in the United States. The American College of Lifestyle Medicine (ACLM) was founded in 2004 by a group led by John Kelly, MD, at Loma Linda University.

In 2010, the landmark JAMA article, *Physician Competencies for Prescribing Lifestyle Medicine*, led by Liana Lianov and Mark Johnson, defined for the first time the core competencies required for clinical practice in this field.

In 2018, ACLM stated that Lifestyle Medicine emphasizes whole-food, plant-based nutrition, physical activity, sleep, emotional well-being, and avoidance of harmful substances for the prevention, treatment, and reversal of lifestyle-related conditions.

The Australian researcher, Garry Egger, further emphasized Lifestyle Medicine integration of medical, behavioral, motivational, and environmental strategies, with self-care playing a central role.

The European Lifestyle Medicine Organization (ELMO, www.eulm.org) was founded in late 2016 in Geneva, Switzerland, by Dr. Stefania Ubaldi and Dr. Ioannis Arkadianos.

Stefania Ubaldi served as the organization's first president, while Ioannis Arkadianos is its current president.

Ioan Hanes, MD, serves as Vice President and is the founder of the European Lifestyle Medicine Certificate.

Ten years ago, Lifestyle Medicine was still relatively unknown in Europe, which led to the development of structured educational initiatives.

Since 2019, the European Lifestyle Medicine Certificate has promoted the eight pillars of Lifestyle Medicine and the importance of the Mediterranean diet.

More than 600 participants have completed the program, including both healthcare professionals and individuals interested in lifestyle-based health approaches.

The European Certificate is delivered online through weekly interactive sessions over ten weeks through expert-led sessions, group projects, and guest speakers, which concludes with an online examination assessing both theoretical and practical knowledge.

ELMO is governed by its members through a General Assembly that elects an Executive Board every four years. The Board appoints the President, Vice President, and Secretary General.

The organization also includes national representatives and ambassadors across Europe and beyond. In addition to its annual congress and the certificate program, ELMO hosts the podcast "*Lifestyle in On Air*" and publishes a newsletter dedicated to patient-centered healthcare and professional education.

ELMO Today: Education, Collaboration, and Scientific Exchange

From September 10–12, 2026, ELMO will host the 7th European Lifestyle Medicine Congress in Brussels, Belgium.

Alongside English-language sessions, the congress will include Dutch-language sessions focused on women's health and French-language sessions dedicated to longevity.

The French-language track will be coordinated by Professor Michel Poulain, one of the founders of the Blue Zones concept. Together with Gianni Pes, he identified regions with exceptionally high numbers of healthy centenarians, including Ikaria (Greece), Okinawa (Japan), Sardinia (Italy), Nicoya (Costa Rica), Loma Linda (California), and, more recently, Martinique (France).

These "Blue Zones" have become important sources of inspiration for healthy longevity and have gained worldwide recognition through the work of Dan Buettner, featured in National Geographic and Netflix.

The Science Behind Lifestyle Medicine

A robust body of epidemiological and interventional evidence supports the association between health behaviors and major disease outcomes.

Landmark studies such as the Seven Countries Study, Framingham Heart Study, INTERHEART, INTERSTROKE, Nurses' Health Study, Adventist Health Study -2, Lyon Diet Heart Study, and the North Karelia Project have consistently demonstrated the profound impact of diet, physical activity, smoking, weight management, and other lifestyle factors on health and longevity.

Similarly, numerous intervention studies have shown that lifestyle changes can modify disease pathophysiology:

- Diabetes Prevention Program: intensive lifestyle intervention reduced

- incident diabetes by 58%
- DiRECT Trial: structured weight - management programs induced remission of type 2 diabetes in many patients
- DASH Trial: dietary modification significantly lowered blood pressure
- DASH-Sodium Trial: sodium reduction produced further blood pressure improvements
- Ornish Lifestyle Heart Trial: intensive lifestyle modification resulted in regression of coronary atherosclerosis
- PREDIMED Trial: a mediterranean diet supplemented with olive oil or nuts significantly reduced major cardiovascular events
- Exercise interventions: physical activity was approximately 3.5 times more effective than standard care in reducing liver fat measured by MRI, independent of weight loss
- Large cohort studies, (2019): cardiovascular risk declines within five years after smoking cessation

The Eight Pillars of European Lifestyle Medicine

ELMO considers eight pillars essential to European Lifestyle Medicine: the six pillars commonly promoted in the United States, together with sexual health and environmental and planetary health.

- Nutrition

Nutrition is one of the most powerful determinants of metabolic health. Evidence-based dietary patterns can contribute significantly to disease prevention, treatment, and long-term health outcomes.

- Physical Activity

Regular physical activity improves cardiovascular fitness, insulin sensitivity, musculoskeletal health, mental wellbeing, and longevity. Exercise is increasingly recognized as a therapeutic intervention.

- Sleep Health

Sleep plays a critical role in metabolic regulation, immune function, cognitive performance, and emotional wellbeing. Poor sleep is associated with increased risk of chronic disease.

- Stress Management

Chronic stress contributes to inflammation, hormonal dysregulation, hypertension, anxiety, and unhealthy coping behaviors. Effective stress-management strategies are therefore an essential component of Lifestyle Medicine.

- Avoidance of Harmful Substances

Smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and substance misuse remain major contributors to preventable disease and mortality worldwide.

- Social Connection

Social support and meaningful relationships are increasingly recognized as important determinants of both physical and mental health.

- Sexual Health

Sexual health is a pillar that I personally introduced into European Lifestyle Medicine, inspired by the World Health Organization's recognition of sexuality as both a component of human health and a fundamental human right.

Research increasingly demonstrates that chronic diseases can be both a cause and a consequence of sexual dysfunction, which may act as an early indicator of underlying lifestyle-related disease.

Furthermore, the sexual health needs of minority populations remain insufficiently addressed, not only in routine consultations but especially in the management of chronic diseases.

Fertility problems, increasingly common among young couples without obvious organic pathology, are also being linked more frequently to lifestyle factors.

Lifestyle interventions may therefore play an important role not only in the prevention but also in the treatment of infertility.

- **Environmental and Planetary Health**

Environmental health is one of the two domains uniquely integrated into the European approach to Lifestyle Medicine.

This pioneering perspective reflects the growing recognition that environmental factors (such as pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss etc..) influence the development of many chronic diseases.

It is also aligned with the broader “One Health” concept, which emphasizes the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental health.

A Patient-Centered Approach

One of the defining characteristics of Lifestyle Medicine is its patient-centered philosophy.

Rather than focusing solely on disease management, Lifestyle Medicine seeks to understand the individual behind the diagnosis and to support sustainable behavior change through collaboration, empathy, and empowerment.

- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)**

One of the most valuable concepts through Lifestyle Medicine education is Motivational Interviewing, a communication method developed by Stephen Rollnick and William Miller.

Initially used in addiction (today we call it – substance use disease) treatment, MI is increasingly applied in the care of patients with chronic disease.

It challenges healthcare professionals because it teaches them that patients themselves are the true experts on their own lives.

Behavioral change therefore requires a different communication style, one based on open-ended questions, active listening, and a non-judgmental attitude.

The healthcare professional becomes a facilitator of change by helping patients to discover and strengthen their own internal motivation.

This approach is reinforced by a compassionate and non-judgmental approach, acknowledging that behavior change is shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, psychological, and environmental factors, including stress, trauma, and structural barriers to health.

Practical Tools Used in Lifestyle Medicine

A common misconception is that Lifestyle Medicine simply consists of generic recommendations such as “eat better” or “exercise more.”

It relies on structured, measurable, and evidence-based clinical tools that help translate scientific knowledge into practical interventions.

- **The 5A Model**

One widely used approach is the 5A Model:

- **Assess** readiness to change and current health status
- **Advise** using clear, evidence-based recommendations
- **Agree** on collaboratively developed goals based on patient’s preferences, priority and readiness for change
- **Assist** patients in setting goals and overcoming barriers
- **Arrange** follow-up and provide ongoing support

This model provides healthcare professionals with a practical structure for behavioral counseling during clinical consultations.

- **Lifestyle Assessment Tools**

Lifestyle Medicine also utilizes validated assessment instruments (i.e., dietary questionnaires, stress, and mental health scales etc.) to evaluate nutrition, physical activity, sleep quality, stress levels, smoking habits, and cardiometabolic risk.

These assessments help to transform lifestyle general discussions into objective and clinically relevant evaluations.

1) SMART Goals

Behavioral change becomes more effective when goals are specific and realistic. Lifestyle Medicine therefore frequently applies the SMART model, which should be:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**ction Oriented
- **R**ealistic
- **T**ime-based

Rather than advising a patient to “exercise more,” a SMART goal might be centered around the idea:

“Walk for 30 minutes, five days per week, for the next month.”

This approach improves adherence, clarity, and long-term sustainability.

2) Exercise Prescription

In Lifestyle Medicine, physical activity is approached similarly to medication prescription.

Physicians may define:

- frequency
- intensity
- time/duration
- type of exercise
- progression over time

For example, a sedentary patient with hypertension may begin with moderate walking sessions several times per weekly before gradually increasing intensity and duration according to tolerance and clinical response.

3) Multidisciplinary Collaboration

Lifestyle Medicine often requires interdisciplinary collaboration.

Physicians may work alongside with different healthcare professionals (i.e.: dietitians, psychologists, physiotherapists, exercise specialists, etc) to provide comprehensive patient care.

This collaborative model reflects the need that chronic disease management goes beyond isolated medical appointments and requires coordinated support across multiple dimensions of health.

The Future of Healthcare Starts with Lifestyle

Lifestyle Medicine represents both a return to the foundational principles of medicine and a modern, evidence-based clinical discipline.

By integrating nutrition, physical activity, sleep health, stress management, behavioral support, social connection, sexual health, and environmental awareness into healthcare, it seeks to address the root causes of many chronic diseases rather than merely managing their consequences.

ELMO was founded on this vision: to promote a scientifically rigorous, compassionate, and patient-centered model of care capable of improving individual health outcomes while contributing to the long-term sustainability of healthcare systems.

As the global burden of chronic disease continues to grow, Lifestyle Medicine offers healthcare professionals and patients a practical, evidence-based framework for creating healthier lives, healthier communities, and more sustainable healthcare systems.

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