

# Our health comes first

By Michael Sullivan

As the Australian representative for Down Syndrome International [self-advocacy group] and an advocate for people with disability, I have been asked to share my experience on health. Medical professionals need to know how to care properly for people with Down syndrome. Through my work at NSW Council for Intellectual Disability we have done lots of work in educating doctors and other health people in how to work with and communicate with people with intellectual disability including people with Down syndrome.

As the Healthy Ageing Ambassador for the UNSW Sydney's Department of Developmental Disability Neuropsychiatry, or 3DN for short, I advocate for better health systems. I have been involved in the Cardiometabolic Health for People with Intellectual Disability Forum and development of resources for GPs. I also helped launch new tools for health professionals to use when working in mental health with people with intellectual disability. Another area 3DN does work in, is research about healthy ageing and dementia in people with intellectual disability. I give advice to the research team. For example, I worked with them on their survey questions for the Successful Ageing in Intellectual Disability Study to make sure the questions will work well for people with intellectual disability.

One of the most important things I do for my health is visit my doctor regularly.

My number one tip is, find a doctor that suits you.

- Get a yearly check up at the doctors.
- Go to your doctor at other times when you are sick or you think something isn't quite right.
- Make sure you find a doctor you can talk to and who listens to you.
- Ask for longer appointments with your doctor.
- Build rapport and trust with your doctor.

Having a healthy lifestyle is important and something I do in my life. Having a healthy lifestyle is not only about eating a variety of good foods and staying active, it's about having fun and having a good life. Trying different activities, getting out and about. It's about keeping all parts of a person healthy.

Medical professionals need to know how to care properly for people with Down syndrome. Families and carers need to know what they can do too. Most importantly, people



● Michael Sullivan, photo credit NSWCID

with Down syndrome need to know that they need to look after themselves.

In our daily lives we all share one thing in common, that is our health and wellbeing and we shouldn't take it for granted. We need to stay fit and well, we need to think of ways we can look after ourselves.

You need to look after number one, yourself and your own health. It is more important than anything else. You need to own it because it is yours to look after.

We need to ask ourselves why does this matter? It matters because health changes throughout our lifetime, we need to think ahead and to live well.

Our health is everything. Without our health what have we got? Each person is different and individual. People with Down syndrome may need specific help with their health and they need support to look after their health, from family, carers and medical professionals. Let's all work together to make sure our health comes first.

*Michael Sullivan has been Chair of NSW Council for Intellectual Disability from 2015–2017. He has previously been on the National Disability Advisory Council in Canberra and currently is on the National Disability Insurance Agency Intellectual Disability Reference Group. Michael is also a member of Down Syndrome NSW.*

