

A prescription you can't fill at the pharmacy

By Jamie Ducharme

DR. ROBERT ZARR, A PEDIATRICIAN IN Washington, D.C., often prescribes therapies that don't come in a bottle or a pill pack. They're redeemable only outdoors, in the fresh air of a local park. These "nature prescriptions"—spend an hour each week playing tennis, for instance, or explore all the soccer fields near your home—might sound whimsical. But Zarr is serious about his scripts, which are recorded in his patients' electronic health records.

"There's a paradigm shift in the way we think about parks: not just as a place to recreate, but literally as a prescription, a place to improve your health," says Zarr, who writes up to 10 park prescriptions per day. In 2017 he founded Park Rx America to make it easier for more health professionals to write park prescriptions for patients of all ages, particularly those with obesity, mental-health issues, or chronic conditions like hypertension and Type 2 diabetes.

Zarr is part of a growing movement to bring the outdoors into medicine. Nobody is claiming that nature will cure diseases on its own, of course, but physicians are capitalizing on the well-established mental and physical health benefits of spending time in green space. A 2017 research review published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* analyzed 64 studies that explored the effects of "forest bathing," or taking a woodsy walk while tuning in to nature, and concluded that the practice is linked to stress relief, less depression and anxiety, lower blood pressure, decreased heart rate and more.

BY WRITING nature prescriptions—alongside pharmaceutical prescriptions, when necessary—physicians are encouraging their patients to get outdoors and take advantage of what many view to be free medicine. The specificity that comes with framing these recommendations as prescriptions, Zarr says, motivates his patients to actually do them. "It's something to look forward to and



THE BENEFITS OF GOING OUTDOORS

RELAXATION

Studies have shown that spending time outdoors can decrease levels of the hormone cortisol, lower blood pressure and reduce other markers of stress.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Exercise is an important pillar of health, and going outside encourages you to get moving, whether by hiking, biking, gardening or strolling.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Parks are inherently social places. Seeing and interacting with others guards against loneliness—a major public-health threat—and fosters community.

MENTAL HEALTH

Research has shown that spending time in green space can lift mood and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, including rumination and feelings of worthlessness.

AWE

Soaking in the arresting beauty of nature has been found to lower levels of inflammation in the body and spark feelings of generosity, perspective and selflessness.

FRESH AIR

Pollution is linked to a number of ills, ranging from respiratory problems to cancer and heart disease—so breathing clean air may reduce your risks.

to try to feel successful about," he says.

In October, NHS Shetland, a government-run hospital system in Scotland, began allowing doctors at 10 medical practices to write nature prescriptions that promote outdoor activities as a routine part of patient care. And in recent years, organizations with the goal of getting people outside for their health have proliferated in the U.S. The National Park Service's Healthy Parks Healthy People program promotes parks as a "powerful health prevention strategy" locally and nationally. Walk With a Doc, which sponsors free physician-led community walks, is now in 47 states, and Park Rx, which has studied and tracked park-prescription programs since 2013, says these are now in at least 33 states and Washington, D.C. Even mental-health professionals are going green. A growing number of "ecotherapy" counselors conduct sessions outdoors to combine the benefits of therapy and nature.

Plus, these unusual prescriptions are the prettiest you'll ever fill—a fact Betty Sun, program manager at the Institute at the Golden Gate, which runs Park Rx, says encourages people to actually do them. "With social media and Instagram, when you see your friends going out to beautiful places, you want to go too," Sun says. "It's about making a positive choice in your life, rather than a punitive choice—like 'You're sick, take a pill.' It just seems so much more supportive." □