

“Governare il diabete” (“to steer diabetes”): A New Proposal for Diabetic Camps

Alessandro Salvatoni, Valeria Pompili, Roberta Biasoli, Roberta Cardani, Gianluigi Arioli¹, Luigi Nespoli

Department of Pediatrics, University of the Insubria, E. Macchi Foundation Hospital, Varese and ¹Sailing Centre, Cerro di Laveno, Italy

Abstract. “Governare il diabete” (the Italian translation of “To steer diabetes”) is a project which gives young diabetics the opportunity of sailing with non-diabetic companions in a protected and educational environment. The education technique, based on the parallelism between sailing and diabetes, encourages correct self-management of both diabetes related and unrelated problems. The impact of the experience on self-esteem, quality of life and metabolic control is currently under investigation.

Key words: Quality of life, self control, self management, insulin dependent diabetes mellitus

Background

The main aims of camps for young diabetics include education in self-management, social adaptation, amusement, and improved self-esteem (1, 2). Young diabetics who attend a camp have the opportunity of meeting diabetic companions, and of sharing experiences with them. However, usually during camps they seldom have the opportunity to meet and interact with non-diabetic companions. The project “governare il diabete” gives young diabetics the opportunity to practise a sport with non-diabetic companions in a protected and educational environment in order to teach them how to manage their disease during regular life and while practising sports. We chose sailing among the different sports available because of its peculiarity. Steering a sailing boat (you *drive* a car, but you *steer* a boat) is similar to controlling blood sugar. The camp guidebook “Governare il diabete” uses a metaphoric language based on the parallelisms between sailing and diabetes (sugar is for the human

body what wind is for a sailing boat and so on). This allows both sailing and diabetes self-management to be taught simultaneously. Moreover we need to challenge natural elements such as water, waves, wind and rain with the same courage needed to face a chronic disease. For this reason, seven years ago in France the association “*a chacun son cap*” started to take leukaemic children out in sailing boats.

During the camps we intend evaluating the impact of the sailing school course on self-esteem using questionnaires which are administered before the camp and again six months after the camps.

Description of the camps organisation

The camps were all set up in a sailing school on the shores of Lago Maggiore in a small village called Cerro di Laveno close to Varese (Italy). Most children came from the same area and so were familiar with the environment. The children stayed in a guesthouse near

the sailing school and in the clubhouse of a local sports centre. The clubhouse was also available for theory lessons or meetings. For practical lessons we used two types of boat: optimist for those up to 12 years of age or 35 kg and Byte (a new sailing boat similar to the Laser but smaller). Sailing instructors, medical and professional staff followed the children during practical lessons aboard three outboard motorboats equipped with waterproof first-aid bags containing injectable glucose solution, glucagone and sugar.

The boats were all equipped with water-resistant containers where the children put their own glucometer, insulin and sugar. The wearing of a lifejacket during practical lessons is compulsory.

The education technique used during the course was to concentrate on practical sailing teaching and to encourage correct self-management of both diabetes related and unrelated problems. Before going on board the children were invited to glance over a safety card which included both nautical (such as lifejackets, bail) and diabetes (blood glucose check, glucose tablets) items.

Camps report

At present we can report on the experience of three sailing camps for a total number of 61 children 9 of which came twice (2001 and 2002). The number of patients who take part in each camp was respectively 13, 25 and 35. During camps most children developed skills both in sailing and self-management of diabetes. According to the sailing instructors the children showed learning performances on average superior than the non-diabetic companions. During navigation, problems such as hypoglycaemia or ketoacidosis did not arise. Most blood glucose tests taken during camps resulted near-normal and a 10% to 30 % reduction of insulin need was observed in half the children. Only a few adolescents, mainly girls, poorly motivated having been reluctantly forced to take part in the course by their parents, developed an opposing behaviour and achieved poor results. The impact of the course on the patients' self-esteem is being followed up by issuing questionnaires before the camp and six months after the camp.

Discussion

The main aim of this camp is to offer young diabetics an experiential and relational opportunity not wholly centred on diabetes. It is in fact primarily an approach to the world of sailing, an opportunity to explore and expand psycho-relational dimensions essential in the growth process and also functional in diabetes management. Contact with the rules and their observance are fundamental, an essential requirement for steering a boat, during the pre-adolescent and adolescent period, the classical period in which youngsters challenge any rule. Adolescents can in fact discover the value of a common behaviour code, necessary for his "navigation", and therefore accept it as his own.

This condition is closely linked to the domain of the autonomy: through sailing the adolescent perceives the beauty of self-management achieved by complying with the rules.

The meaning of the deep developing challenge, which is specific to all young adolescents, is far more important in the young diabetic where the acceptance of a reliable and free self-management of his own metabolic control represents a crucial time.

Sailing is, for young people, an important experience in autonomy that proves them "to be able to...", "to get out of...", and consequently gives them a positive impulse for the promotion of their self esteem, a fundamental element in the structure of their identity. Furthermore the sailing experience is a significant opportunity to meet others and form relationships resulting in mutual help and encouragement in social solidarity. During the camp diabetic and non-diabetic children become fully aware of the ability to face up to such ambitious experiences and consequently improve their social integration and reduce any sense of inferiority and difference.

The motto "to steer diabetes" summarizes the philosophy of the camp. The young diabetic experiences the possibility of managing his own disease, adapting it to suit the situation and thus avoid being "at the mercy of the waves".

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Correspondence: Prof. Alessandro Salvatoni,

Associate Professor of Pediatrics

DSCB - Univeristy of the Insubria

Via F.del Ponte, 19

21100 Varese, Italy

E-mail: alessandro.salvatoni@uninsubria.it