

Men's health matters

An Australian CA is highlighting the importance of men's health issues by holding what he hopes will be an annual ball as a charity fundraiser.

BY BEN POWER

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LONDON-BORN Vik Bhandari was a chartered accountant with Ernst & Young in Barbados when the opportunity to move to Australia came up. By chance, Bhandari and his wife, Bhavisha, hosted an EY partner from Sydney who was passing through on a cruise. Months later the partner contacted Bhandari and said there was a vacancy in the Sydney office.

"I was sold on the lifestyle in Australia," he says.

Like many foreigners, he had a vision of leaving work early and diving into the breakers at Bondi Beach.

But the reality of Australian work shocked him.

"I've never been to Bondi straight from work," he says.

"In Australia, in the finance industry you work harder and longer than most other nations."

The lifestyle was also sedentary, particularly for accountants chained to their desk during the busy season.

A series of distressing health scares for close family members focused Bhandari's mind on the dangers posed by this unhealthy lifestyle. Bhandari

and his wife are now emerging crusaders for men's health, launching the Men's Health Awareness Ball to raise funds and awareness for men's health, which is set to become a fixture in Sydney's winter calendar.

Bhandari wants men to begin taking their health seriously, to start talking about it, and above all acting to improve it by engaging with doctors and changing their lifestyles.

East ender

Bhandari's community work began early in his life. He grew up in Ilford, a tough part of the urban sprawl of East London.

"It got worse as I was there," he says. "You had to be a street smart kid just to survive there. To actually go and get an education you had to really work hard."

Bhandari did work hard and he graduated with a computer science and information technology degree from Manchester University, before joining mid-tier accounting firm Neville Russell (now Mazars) to complete his CA.

He wanted other kids from East London to follow his path, and he

began mentoring 16 to 18 year olds, encouraging them to get out of the estates and get an education.

"I told them that I came from humble beginnings and that if I could do it they could. I wanted them to achieve greater things, rather than just taking the first job that came along, or worse still, relying on the dole [welfare]."

In 1998 he was honoured by Queen Elizabeth II with a Young Achievers Award for his mentoring work.

Charity work

After six years with EY in Sydney, Bhandari moved to Financial Reporting Specialists (FRS), where he is now the managing partner/director. FRS produces financial statements for companies, freeing the CFO to focus on the day-to-day running of their businesses.

FRS also has a social focus. Each year, it donates a percentage of gross revenues to charity. This financial year it will donate A\$20,000 to the bowel cancer charity The Jodi Lee Foundation. Last year it donated a similar sum to Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT), and the



previous year A\$20,000 to children's palliative care provider, Bear Cottage.

But men's health had also been becoming an issue for Bhandari.

One Sunday morning six years ago, his then 74-year-old father was getting out of bed when he collapsed on the floor. He called out to his wife that he could not get up. Suffering from Parkinson's Disease, she was in no position to lift him and immediately called for an ambulance. Bhandari, living on the other side of the world, got that dreaded call in the middle of the night – your dad has suffered an ischaemic stroke (cause by a blood clot), is in hospital and is completely paralysed on his left side.

"I dropped everything and caught the next available flight to London. It was the worst 24-hour flight ever," Bhandari says.

Fast-forward to today, and his father has recovered some mobility, but he walks with a stick and requires assistance to do simple daily chores.

The stroke was a surprise. His father had been the healthy partner in the marriage and regularly exercised and

did yoga. But what struck Bhandari was the message from the doctors: his father's stroke could have been avoided if he'd had a cholesterol check.

Close calls

Bhandari kept hearing other stories of close calls for men. A partner at KPMG had a routine medical examination as part of his life insurance application. He got a phone call telling him to rush straight to his GP. He had extremely high cholesterol levels and was at high-risk of a stroke. The partner had the shocking realisation that if he'd continued working during the busy season without taking action he could have dropped dead. The partner now has regular check-ups and takes Statin to control his cholesterol levels.

Bhandari says that there is a heavy emphasis on women's health issues in society. While that is a good thing, men's health issues have a tendency to fly under the radar. And traditionally, when men experience symptoms that concern them, they are reluctant to seek medical advice.

Bhandari notes that every hour four

Above left: Vik and Bhavisha Bhandari at the Mens Health Awareness Ball 2016. **Top right:** Vik addressing the room at the ball. **Above right:** Presenting a cheque to Foundation 49.

men in Australia die from preventable conditions and, on average, men live five years less than women.

Men are dying from heart disease – the number one killer of men – and are also at high risk of lung and bowel cancer, the biggest killers of Australians.

More men die of prostate cancer than women die of breast cancer, yet prostate cancer receives a fraction of the media attention.

Men are also susceptible to stress, burnout and depression.

Bhandari says the corporate lifestyle, particularly for accountants, increases the risk of bad health.

"Not moving all day long doesn't help with the digestive system and blood circulation," he says.

"The higher you get on the corporate ladder the more entertaining, wining and dining, you do."

He was at a recent networking event and there were "bits of food" floating ▶

For accountants, health suffers during the traditional busy period of July, August and September.

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around to eat but “lots and lots” to drink. “There is a whole culture around drinking and socialising – you go through the busy season and then have big parties to celebrate.”

Season of ill health

For accountants, health suffers during the traditional busy period of July, August and September.

“You’re sitting at a desk trying to get your work done, trying to survive the busy season. I know so many people who have a drink or several at the end of the day just to unwind,” Bhandari says.

The solution is seemingly obvious: for men and accountants to start taking their health seriously. That means getting active.

“Take serious action on your own health,” Bhandari says. “Move and do something rather than sit.”

He says most men don’t have a regular GP, which means no one is getting a consistent reading of their health so changes – potential warning signs – can be noted.

But while the solution is obvious, how do you actually get accountants, particularly, to take notice and begin acting?

Balls

In March Bhandari was chatting with his wife about how to get the message out. They mused on the possibility of a men’s health event and they decided to scope out and plan a modest fundraiser.

But when he told people of his plans

the response was overwhelming.

“I would talk to people and they would say ‘that’s a good idea’. A number of CFOs immediately said ‘yep we’ll be in.’”

Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand took a table, as did accounting firms Bentleys and Nexia Australia. The Sheraton on the Park, an FRS client, provided the venue.

The night raised A\$34,000, significantly more than the A\$10,000 expected. Proceeds were distributed between The Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia, the Heart

Foundation and Foundation 49, a promoter of men’s health.

Bhandari is now planning another event for June 2017 and hopes this will become an annual event.

“Men just don’t [talk] and they keep things bottled up. It must be a macho thing,” he says. “If they did talk, they’d realise a whole lot of other people have the same problems.” ●

menshealthawarenessball.com

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Table 1: Regular servicing

Men’s health activist and chartered accountant Vik Bhandari says keeping your body in peak condition is similar to maintaining your car in top shape. It requires constant check-ups and monitoring. “We get our cars serviced on a regular basis, why not ourselves?”

CAR TALK	HEALTH TALK
Annual rego	Annual health check-up
Performance [oil pressure, km/ltr, kW, 0-100 time etc]	Know your numbers [blood pressure, PSA, cholesterol, glucose etc]
Who is the previous owner	Know your family history
Get a mechanic you can trust	Build a rapport with your GP
If it is rattling or making noises, take it to the garage	If you have any health concerns, take prompt action
Service intervals for your car [20,000km, 30,000km etc]	Know the health risks for your age group [20s, 30s etc]
Broken drive shaft or misfiring	Erectile dysfunction
Fuel injector blockage	Type 1 or 2 diabetes
Faulty headlights	Vision impairment
Fuel lines	Arteries
Blocked extractors	Constipation
Regular vehicle use “Ridding the cobwebs”	Exercise