Doc says Americans sold a bill of goods on strenuous exercise

By PATRICIA McCORMACK
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NEW YORK — Sauntering down a corridor at New York Hospital, balding and mild-mannered Dr. Henry A. Solomon — 5 feet 9 and 185 pounds — does not look capable of picking a fight.

But he just has. With no less than 5 million Americans partaking in strenuous exercise, joggers included.

Solomon, a cardiologist, says Americans have been sold a bill of goods on the benefits of strenuous exercise — the promises that exercise pays off in longevity or that it can offer immunity from heart disease.

“I’m expecting controversy,” Solomon said in an interview about theories in a book, “The Exercise Myth,” which was due out last Friday.

“People are afraid of being seen as fat. They want to be a certain size. I think the death of Jim Fixx, guru to the nation’s runners, at the age of 52 while jogging, was tragic. Solomon said, “I really do believe his exercise killed him. He died in the act of running. He died a sudden death while in the act of exercising.”

Solomon made these other claims:
- It is a misconception that exercise promotes cardiovascular health.
- The stress test, designed to detect heart disease and to prescribe appropriate levels of exercise, is an inaccurate and ineffective method of determining actual heart condition.
- There is no conclusive evidence that exercise can deter the major factors known to cause heart disease or that it can retard the progression of heart disease once it has been detected.
- Vigorous exercise can result in serious injury and in some cases can provoke heart attacks, including fatal ones.

THE TROUBLE with the stress test, says Solomon, is that it largely measures the functional abilities of the cardiovascular system while ignoring the fact that heart disease is a structural problem.

What about exercise for defusing anxiety and depression? Solomon says it does so by any other enjoyable diversion, would.

What about exercise advancing weight loss?

“You can lose weight without strenuous exercise,” Solomon said. “To me the essence of weight control is the number of calories taken in vs. the number expended.”

The heart doctor recommends minimal exercise.

“I walk a couple of miles a day,” he said. “I walk from the office to the hospital. I walk back to the office. If there is time, I walk to a meeting — and then back to hospital or office.

“This is for health reasons. I do it because I like it.

“Besides, did you ever try to get a taxi in New York?”