



True love keeps the heart beating

Katrina Strickland

ALL you need is love — or so sang The Beatles. Hard headed 21st-centuryists know this to be rubbish; you need a telly, a car, a mobile phone, a palm pilot and an iPod, for starters.

But a Melbourne academic told a conference on health and ageing at the weekend that, while we need more than love to keep us alive, love may keep us alive for longer.

Marc Cohen told the International Conference on Health Ageing and Longevity in Brisbane that there was multiple evidence to suggest that love, and lots of it, was a prime cause of a long, high-quality life (unexpected accidents notwithstanding).

Before singles reach for the razor blades, however, they should note that Professor Cohen is not talking about romantic love — he defines love as something that makes you feel as if time has stopped still.

Therefore, if you love gardening, or painting, or computer games, and get so immersed in it that you forget to make yourself lunch, then you're probably doing fine. If you hate your job and spend five days a week watching the clock tick around to 5pm, then you might be in trouble.

"All activities where you're totally focused on an act and lose track of time are loving activities," Professor Cohen said. "There is increasing clinical evidence that enjoy-

ing loving activities will help prolong life."

Founding professor of complementary medicine at Melbourne's RMIT University, Cohen pointed to a 1970s US study which found that rabbits cuddled by their laboratory assistants lived 60 per cent longer than those that weren't, even when both were fed the same high-fat diets.

A study of 1000 Israeli men who suffered heart disease found those who felt loved by their wives had 50 per cent less angina and cardiac attacks to those with problematic relationships.

The fact that women live longer than men can also be traced back to love — the love they dole out to children and partners, in the face of sometimes brutal indifference.

So if love's what we need, where can we get more of it? Doing something you really enjoy is a good start, Professor Cohen said. But just as pain declines when it is shared, so joy increases when it involves other people.

He pointed to a 2002 National Heart Foundation study that showed social isolation and lack of group support were as significant as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and smoking among people with heart disease.

"Positive social connections are more powerful than being alone," he said.

If you must be alone, however, meditate; Professor Cohen thinks it's a good way of stimulating that feeling of time stopping still.