

## Hydrotherapy

### Foreword

For many people who are, like me, living with a neuromuscular condition, hydrotherapy can be essential in maintaining the best quality of life for the longest time possible.

In some countries hydrotherapy is seen as a vital part of conventional medicine and patients are reimbursed by the health-insurance companies in some of these regions, at least in part (e.g. Germany). However, in the UK, hydrotherapy is seen as complementary therapy and disabled people and their families find it extremely difficult to access this service.

Where NHS-funded hydrotherapy is available it is often restricted to patients whose improvements can be demonstrably measured. A patient with a broken leg can be documented as referred, treated and then discharged or 'cured'. I know this from first hand experience when I broke my leg 15 months ago. I was given hydrotherapy for the leg, not for muscular dystrophy, because those like me with neuromuscular conditions fail to meet the "cured" criteria.

Hydrotherapy and other water-based activity are a vital health and social activity for families. They build confidence, provide important sporting opportunities for disabled people and promote mobility. But, just as important, is the feeling of well-being when one is immersed in warm water. It is a relaxing time, even if one is exercising quite hard.

I urge anyone reading this to join me and the **Muscular Dystrophy Campaign** in calling on hospital trusts and local authorities to improve the availability of hydrotherapy services to ensure the best quality of life of disabled people.

**Baroness Celia Thomas of Winchester**

## Key findings

- In the South West of England, only 8% of people affected by muscular dystrophy receive hydrotherapy<sup>1</sup>;
- NHS hydrotherapy provision is extremely poor; in Plymouth, for example, patients can only receive hydrotherapy if they are inpatients at the Plym Centre;
- people are frequently limited to 6-8 sessions and then discharged and usually cannot be referred again for between six months and a year;
- disabled children and adults feel excluded from Council run leisure centres as the water temperature is often too cold for people with limited movement and strength;
- private leisure clubs charge expensive fees and the pools are not always disabled friendly;
- the cost of a hydrotherapy session varies across the region; prices can range from a donation to £30;
- hydrotherapy pools attached to special schools are too shallow for adults to use.

In January 2009, the South West Muscle Group carried out a Freedom of Information request to all General Practitioners in Plymouth PCT. One third of GP surgeries responded.

Our information request found:

- GPs do not refer patients with long-term conditions for hydrotherapy;
- Children and adults affected by muscular dystrophy have to be inpatients on the Plym unit in order to access the hydrotherapy facility at Derriford Hospital;
- The limit on the number of sessions per referral would be 2 to 3 sessions per week for 6 to 8 weeks.

Commenting on these findings, **Helen Starbuck**, Chair of the South West Muscle Group, said:

“I am really surprised that hydrotherapy seems only to be accessible at times of crisis. If this was part of my ongoing care it would allow me to be more independent, more mobile and breath easier.”

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<sup>1</sup> September 2008 the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign carried out a patient survey of people affected by Muscular Dystrophy and other neuromuscular conditions. 85 people responded from the South West of England.

## Action needed

We are calling on Primary Care Trusts, hospital trusts and local authorities to:

- recognise the real health and social benefits of hydrotherapy and water-based activity for disabled people;
- ensure that children and adults with neuromuscular conditions have access to hydrotherapy and other water based activities on an ongoing basis;
- improve access to Derriford Hospital Hydrotherapy Pool, which stands empty for much of the time, for local disabled groups free of charge;
- ensure that the plans for the Sharon Davies Life Centre in Plymouth include provision for a hydrotherapy pool.

## What are the benefits?

A number of families have shared with us the importance of hydrotherapy and the difficulties they experience in accessing hydro facilities.

Case 1: A mother whose son has Duchenne muscular dystrophy commented, “Over the years and as my son’s physical abilities have declined, hydrotherapy has become more important to give him freedom of movement. Ironically it has been more difficult to access. After a concerted effort I have managed to gain access to hydrotherapy in a local special school. On many occasions this session has been denied to my son and I have had to ‘fight’ to get it reinstated. We would love to have the opportunity to use a hydrotherapy pool when it was convenient for us.”

Case 2: A woman commented on the hydrotherapy she receives, “I am a wheelchair user and receive night-time ventilation for my condition. I pay £20 a session to receive hydrotherapy as I cannot access it through the NHS. Hydrotherapy makes me feel better for at least three days after my session – it helps my muscles and lungs a lot.”

Case 3: A woman with muscular dystrophy living in the north of the region said: “As a retired physiotherapist I know the benefits of swimming and hydrotherapy. I can do lots of things in water that I couldn’t do on dry land. The buoyancy means that I can lift my arms and do stretching exercises. It makes my muscles more alive and is both relaxing and stimulating. I pay a small fee to use the pool and I often go with friends. It is really sociable and I have even managed a sponsored swim.”

Case 4: Commenting on the importance of water based activities for her family, one lady whose daughter has muscular dystrophy said: “Swimming and water based activities is one area where children and adults of all abilities can enjoy being together, exercise, and relax. Hydrotherapy and swimming pools suitable for the disabled are a hugely beneficial and health enhancing facility for families like us: the warm water is a necessity, not a luxury, and the ability to exercise without weight bearing is an extraordinary feeling for those who can no longer stand on their own two feet. The provision of hydrotherapy, and the availability of warm pools, is an astoundingly haphazard thing in the UK, and here in the South West, it is almost non-existent. We need these facilities, and with only a little effort and expense, they could be available to us.”

## Health and social benefits

Rosie Paver, Head of Physiotherapy at the Neuromuscular Centre in Winsford Cheshire, commented on the benefits of hydrotherapy for patients with neuromuscular conditions,

"Hydrotherapy provides an excellent environment for exercise because of the buoyancy and resistance it offers. Given that these are muscle-wasting conditions, it would be reasonable to expect that patients would benefit from this type of exercise, in maintaining and possibly improving both cardiorespiratory function and muscle strength."

According to Mike Mynard, Chairman of the Hydrotherapy Association of Chartered Physiotherapists, the list of patients who benefit from hydrotherapy includes anyone who has a reduced ability to carry any weight.<sup>i</sup>

Hydrotherapy can be a highly effective form of therapeutic exercise for people with muscle weakness. Studies suggest that measurable improvement in the quality of daily living may be obtained in patients with neuromuscular conditions when they receive physiotherapy in association with hydrotherapy.<sup>ii</sup> Hydrotherapy can be particularly beneficial for people with these chronic and progressive conditions and patient experience illustrates it as an effective way of controlling pain and increasing mobility.

In elderly patients with degenerative joints or spinal diseases, thermal hydrotherapy efficiently reduces muscle tension. Studies have also been carried out to show the benefit of hydrotherapy for arthritis sufferers and the superiority of hydrotherapy over land based exercise in relieving pain<sup>iii</sup>. A randomised controlled trial showed that exercise in water increases quadriceps strength and improves the walking distance<sup>iv</sup> and has a favourable cost benefit outcome<sup>v</sup>.

## Cost benefits

Because of the apparatus involved (namely the requirement for a heated pool with staff), hydrotherapy is seen by some NHS hospitals as a "luxury they cannot afford". However, studies carried out in the UK have shown that hydrotherapy can be a cost-effective way of helping patients to improve their overall quality of life, especially when combined with land-based physiotherapy.<sup>vi</sup>

## Current provision in Devon and Cornwall

A number of hydrotherapy pools are adjoined to schools. Disabled children attending special schools are often able to enjoy the use of these facilities as part of their schooling. However, once children leave school it becomes very difficult as an adult to access these facilities, particularly as a number of pools are not deep enough for adults. A number of pools sit empty in the holidays.

A mother of a young man with muscular dystrophy commented on hydrotherapy, "He receives hydrotherapy at school and the water really helps his muscles and movement. But when the holidays come he receives nothing for six weeks."

We have identified the following pools in the area:

- Dame Hannah Rogers School
- Woodlands School
- Millford School
- Polkyth pool – This is a separate hydrotherapy pool which is away from the main pool within the St Austell leisure centre
- Downham pool
- Derriford Hospital – this is only accessible to inpatients at the Plym unit.
- Blagdon Farm, Launceston -this is an adapted holiday park with an indoor heated hydrotherapy pool.
- Central Park Leisure Centre – there is a disability only session on a Sunday 'Pisces Club'. This is a normal public pool and is not heated.
- Marjon Pool – a tracking system is being put in for disabled people.

It can be done – an example of a good hydrotherapy pool – Dame Hannah Rogers School pool. This is a modern, clean and well-heated pool. Usually, there is good availability in this pool. The water is a good temperature. It is a good shape and fairly deep. There is a stretcher hoist and nice changing area. There is a good sound system and lights that work in conjunction with the sound system. There is also a spa area within the pool which the children really enjoy.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/4313264.stm>

<sup>ii</sup> Cuthna MB, Spinal muscular atrophy type 2 and 3: evolution of 50 patients with physiotherapy and hydrotherapy in a swimming pool, Arch Neuropsychiatr 1996; 54: 402-406

<sup>iii</sup> Silva L E et al, Hydrotherapy versus conventional land-based exercise for the management of patients with osteoarthritis of the knee: a randomized clinical trial, Physical Therapy, 2008 Jan; 88(1):12-21. Epub 2007 Nov 6

<sup>iv</sup> Foley A, Halbert J, Hewitt T & Crotty M. Does hydrotherapy improve strength and physical function in patients with osteoarthritis e a randomised controlled trial comparing a gym based and a hydrotherapy based strengthening programme. Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases 2003; 62(12): 1162e1167.

<sup>v</sup> Cochrane T, Davey RC & Matthes Edwards SM. Randomised controlled trial of the cost-effectiveness of water-based therapy for lower limb osteoarthritis. Health Technology Assessment 2005; 9(31): iiiiv, ixexi, 1e114.

<sup>vi</sup> [www.nchta.org/execsumm/summ939.htm](http://www.nchta.org/execsumm/summ939.htm)