

Warm water, deep healing with aquatic therapy

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he water calls to Marianne Hansen ... and the aquatic therapist at Queens Park Care Centre in New Westminster answers it every day.

-This is the thing that I am so passionate about: when you free the body in that way, in semi-weightlessness and warmth, theres this huge letting-go process. Ive never seen it in any other kind of therapy. When you free the body and are not looking for clinical results, you get the human result, and the only word I can use for it is joy," she says.

Aquatic therapy is still relatively obscure in Canada, but well established in many other countries, particularly the USA and Germany. Clinical studies from those countries confirm what Hansensees with her patients ... that a combination of passive floating, gentle movement and massage in awarm pool, guided and supported by a practitioner, is a remarkably effective therapy.

-With the warm water, we already have some pain management. Also, we have hydrostatic pressure. Patients are in an environment that is putting pressure on them in a way that is uniform and consistent. So it makes things like circulation and respiratory function more effective. These things work when the patient is passive too, but when you add exercises, we get huge results," she says.

Hansen didnt start out intending to be an aquatic therapist, although she grew up in and around pools. She worked as a swimming instructor and lifeguard, swam competitively, and practiced synchronized swimming. In the 1980s she attended the University of Calgary where she completed her Bachelors of Physical Education, specializing in kinesiology. However, at that time, kinesiology was still a fledgling discipline and didnt offer a discernable career path.

-I came out of university and was standing around saying, "What can I do with this? There werent a lot of opportunities." So she went in other directions ... designing childrens clothing, operating a health food restaurant.

Then, in 1999, she had a near-fatal car accident. After that, she knew she needed to find a career that matched her interests. Aquatics work became available in Kelowna, and she found work at the hospital, and for ICBC.

-When we moved to Vancouver, I specifically went out and looked for a job as an aquatic therapist." Along the way, Hansen pursued the training that had not been readily available back when she graduated from university. Shes made repeated trips the United States to earn certification in WATSU (the acronym stands for WATer + ShiatSU) aquatic therapy, Waterdance and WATSU Assistant Teacher Trainer. Add these to her

aquatic certifications and her BPE, and she has a long list of credentials.-It took a lot of hard work to get here," she says. -I didnt even know about WATSU till three years ago! Ive really fast-tracked because I knew this is mycalling. I am totally committed to it.

"The job at Queens Park came up in 2002. There was a pool already in the facility, mostly unused.- Physiotherapists had been taking people into it, but with staffing allocations the way they are, trying to run a pool program while doing a regular job wasnt working." Management decided that instead of cementing the pool in ... a solution that is, unfortunately, common, says Hansen ... they would create a position for a qualified aquatic therapist. Hansen spent about eight months setting up the program before beginning to work with patients.The program has been a huge success.

-It has actually become a very big draw for families placing their loved ones here. Theres no shortage of people wanting to have aquatic bodyworkand aquatic therapy," she says.

Queens Park Care Centre is a busy place, with 150 beds for residential extended care and approximately 150 beds for various other programs, mainly for the frail elderly.

-Most of my patients are multiple diagnosis ...they may have Parkinsons plus congestive heart failure, or MS plus diabetes. I see everyone from quadriplegics to mobile," says Hansen.

When her patients go to the pool to work with her, they enter a space markedly different from thehustle-and-bustle of the medical facility upstairs. The air is warm and damp, the walls paneled with cedar, relaxing music plays, and Hansen is there to greet and ease them into the warm waters of the circular pool.

Patients in wheelchairs are taken down a ramp until they are deep enough to be floated up into the water. By then the therapeutic experience is already underway.

Marianne Hansen Aquatic Therapist Queens Park Care Centre

-One of my clients is a non-responsive brain-injured quadriplegic. WhatI notice when he gets inthe water is the softening of the muscles andthe opening of the joints; the body is letting go. I notice his eyes aremore alert or aware; theres a softening," she says.

The water facilitates healing on multiple levels, and can affect people in surprisingly deep ways.

-Theres a freeing of the body that happens, and with the mind and body being so connected, when the body starts to feel that freedom, the mind starts to free itself. Its like opening the doors inward. Itsan opportunity to go into themselves and find that inner sanctuary," she says.

-Thats the sacredness of water. It doesnt happen the same way on land." 

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