

Water Bridges the Gap by Terri Mitchell, PTA

The Aquatic Physical Therapist at a Rehab Center is treating a woman in the pool who has just had her right knee replaced. The patient will be discharged in a few days and wants to know when she will be able to go back to the health club and continue her water exercise class. The patient is knowledgeable about her limitations, and the therapist has done a great job of teaching the patient some functional aquatic exercises. The Physical Therapist, however, is not familiar with the aquatic fitness specialist, nor the type of class the patient wants to attend, and is not sure of an answer.

In the meantime, at the health club down the street, the aquatic fitness specialist is preparing for her water aerobics class and a new participant walks in, introduces herself, and explains that her doctor told her to come to water exercise for her arthritic knees to get in shape for a knee replacement in 3 months. The aquatic fitness specialist, however, is cautious about the appropriateness of the class for this participant and requests a written referral from the doctor, and a medical history. The aquatic fitness specialist's next decision is whether she wants the responsibility of this person in class with the more experienced, more fit participants, and recommends a gentler water walking class.

These are some examples that happen daily in rehab centers, private clinics and fitness centers of how patients are getting caught in the gap between aquatic fitness and aquatic physical therapy.

In an ideal situation, the therapist is aware of the aquatic fitness specialist, or the type of class, and will communicate by phone or in writing to the specialist any pertinent information about integrating the patient into a community program.

In the other ideal scenario, the aquatic fitness specialist will communicate with the new participant about whether or not they have had physical therapy, any precautions or other medical concerns they have, ask permission to contact the physician, and describe the class to the participant, explaining that everyone works at their own pace. It may be determined that the class is too vigorous for this person, and the aquatic fitness specialist may recommend a gentler water walking class, instead. Otherwise, the aquatic fitness specialist would contact the physician and get a written referral.

Do you live in an ideal world?

In speaking with physical therapists about where they discharge their patients after therapy, many of them said they had hoped they had given their client the tools to be able to perform their water exercises independently, knowledgeable of their precautions. Several reported they were not aware of any water exercise classes in their community. Others who **did** know of existing water exercise classes were reluctant to refer their clients to health clubs because they were not aware of the expertise, or lack thereof of the aquatic fitness specialist.

In a survey of aquatic fitness specialists, only a few had a relationship with a physical therapist whom they could call with questions when a client had a question or concern about their body. Most were intimidated at the idea of even trying to call a therapist.

Credibility

As Physical Therapists, what can we do to bridge the gap with the aquatic fitness specialist so that we are comfortable with the level of care our patients receive after discharge? What are our expectations and standards for the Aquatic Fitness Specialist?

The Physical Therapist with the knowledge in pathology, specific precautions for certain diagnoses, and a medical background who is willing to communicate and learn more about aquatic exercises, is in an excellent position to build a bridge with an aquatic fitness specialist to enhance patient care and promote higher fitness levels in “special populations” in the community.

The aquatic fitness specialist who holds current certification by an accredited association, understands basic anatomy and physiology, is knowledgeable in the principles and properties of water, has a repertoire of safe and effective exercises, is in an excellent position to secure referrals from physical therapists. An aquatic fitness specialist with a college degree is a bonus, even though it may be in an unrelated field.

Keep in mind that fitness professionals chose their career because they want to help people achieve a higher quality of life through gains made with exercise. General aquatic fitness classes include exercises that work on improved range of motion, increased LE and UE strength, muscle endurance, coordination, balance, and fun.

Building Bridges

What are some of the first steps we can take to build bridges with the aquatic fitness specialists in our community? Two ideas include:

Attend a water exercise class at a fitness center in your community. Assess the ability level of participants to determine if your patient could integrate into the class. Talk with the instructor before and after class regarding your intentions. Are different levels of classes available? Determine if this instructor is professional and competent enough to accept your referrals, and if so, set up a meeting to discuss methods of communicating, sharing ideas, and **your** acceptance of future referrals for physical therapy.

Organize a training program at your aquatic therapy facility. Acknowledge in your invitation to aquatic professionals, as well as to physical therapists, your goal of bridging the gap between the medical and fitness community! Your curriculum could include an anatomy and kinesiology review, basic medical terminology, precautions and discharge goals of your orthopedic clients, and a networking session among the two groups to breakdown barriers, build trust and increase awareness of the supply and demand of safe and effective aquatic exercise classes.

By working together, physical therapists and aquatic fitness professionals can build the bridge for an aquatic continuum of care.

It could be fun. It could be a learning experience. It's the future! Start building your bridges now. Your patients will love you for it!

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