

AQUATIC THERAPY'S ROLE FOR MANAGEMENT OF THE DIFFICULT SHOULDER PATIENT; A LOOK "SEA" ON TREATMENT EFFECTIVENESS OF PATIENT'S RESPONSE TO AQUATIC REHABILITATION.

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Background and Purpose:

Many of our patients with complicated shoulder pathology also present with poor posture, cervical restrictions, diffuse upper quarter muscle guarding, pain and apprehension with movement. These patients may not respond well to conventional land physical therapy but can benefit from the addition of aquatic therapy to their rehabilitation program. Aquatic therapy is when exercises are performed where the body is immersed in heated water. For the past 30 years, I have used aquatic therapy in treating patients with a myriad of pathologies, including painful muscle joints, arthritis, neurological disorders, and chronic spinal pain. I have seen clinically the apprehensive, painful, restricted shoulder patient improve dramatically in attitude, confidence, mobility, strength and function after implementation of aquatics.

Case Description:

I will present two cases with documented shoulder pathology with other complicating factors. The addition of aquatic physical therapy to their land physical therapy program brought the patients to a higher level of function, comfort, and mobility. Available literature and research of the benefits of aquatics (sea vs. land) will also be discussed.

Outcomes:

Each of the patients initially received conventional land physical therapy, including alternate applications of moist heat and ice, electrotherapy, manual therapy, and therapeutic exercise as indicated. In both cases the addition of aquatic therapy had a positive effect on their recovery. Objective measurements documenting pain, function, and mobility were taken before and after aquatic therapy was introduced. From my clinical experience, the addition of aquatic therapy allowed "difficult" shoulder patients to progress in strength and range of motion with fewer complaints of pain and increased exercise tolerance.

Discussion:

Physical therapists are always looking for more effective ways to treat the "difficult" shoulder patient. Many of our patients with shoulder pathology do not respond timely or positively to our conventional physical therapy modalities performed on land. Shoulder patients who present with poor postural awareness and with upper quarter restrictions may require an alternate atmosphere that creates less patient apprehension and fosters pain-free ease of movement. Aquatic physical therapy creates this atmosphere with less fear and apprehension, less joint compression with a resulting ease of movement and patient compliance. After a patient's short-term goals are met with aquatic physical therapy, progression to land, weight bearing exercises, and functional training can then be implemented with greater success.