



Is Your Aquatic Facility Ready for Everyone?

Ideas for making your aquatics program suitable for everyone, especially people with special needs

BY MARK BLANK

Over the past 30 years aquatic therapy has moved from the deep recesses of locker rooms with those small old-fashioned whirlpool tubs to large facilities in their own right.

Today, more than ever, swimming pool access has become the singular most important hurdle facing Illinois park facility managers and aquatic directors. And, as individual consideration has become a necessity for addressing the increasing number of users with special needs, so has having both specialized access equipment and specific aquatic programs for their therapy and recreation. Developing effective programs for people with special needs as well as other users seeking aquatic therapy and fitness workouts is proving to be a significant and most important issue.

One obstacle in particular is that of equal access. Making the pool available is only half the battle; ease of use is a much harder conquest. Sometimes two or more people may be needed for handling a special needs student. A water-powered lift is usually necessary. Depending on the pool's size and time of day. Limiting access to other users is at times unavoidable.

Perhaps the fastest-growing area in aquatics today is implementing a set of specialty programs for physical therapy and people with special needs. Something to remember is that there are so many different ways of using a swimming pool that making it anything you need it to be is the key to success. While functioning as a therapy pool for some, almost any pool can be used for aquatic activities in which everyday users can help to improve whatever sports they are in, at the same time in another area others simply can recreate.

"The future of swimming pool facilities is going to rely heavily on aquatic therapy and fitness programs," says Adolph Kiefer, owner of Adolph Kiefer and Associates of Zion, Ill.

"The days of using swimming pools solely for recreation and bathing are going to stay in the last century.

"Today, there are more kids learning to swim than ever before, swimming in clubs, participating in and racing competitively. As they grow they'll teach their kids, swim in masters programs, and look to exercise in the water. They'll find physical rehabilitation in the form of aquatic therapy."

Hoping to fill the void in the area of rehabilitation, legions of physical therapists have turned to aquatic therapy for its unique benefits. Over the past 30 years aquatic therapy has moved from the deep recesses of locker rooms with those small old-fashioned whirlpool tubs to large facilities in their own right. Therapy tanks and pools are commonplace in clubs, universities and at professional sports team training centers. Swimming facilities around the world have been developing water aerobic or hydro-aerobic group workouts, getting more sophisticated with each year. And still, the popularity of aquatic therapy's growth is dependent on the aquatic therapy professionals who are constantly discovering new treatments and developing new methods of therapy.

Aquatic therapy is described as using a series of exercises and activities designed to take advantage of the unique

healing benefits of water. Because of the buoyancy water provides, it lessens the pressure on

January/February 2000 | 23

SPECIAL FOCUS

muscles and joints, assists with movement and reduces swelling caused by gravity. Without the pull of gravity working against them, patients can exercise more comfortably, and over time, increase their levels of strength, tolerance, flexibility and endurance with less pain and stress.

Aquatic therapy has proven to be an effective treatment and rehabilitation for patients who have had or have:

- Amputation
- Arthritis
- Chronic Pain
- Cognitive Impairments
- Decreased Conditioning
- Decreased Coordination
- Head Injury
- Knee, Hip or Shoulder Replacement
- Muscle Spasm
- Orthopedic Trauma
- Reduced Endurance
- Pediatric Developmental Delays
- Spinal Cord Injury
- Stroke
- Weakness or lack of muscle tone

"The goal of an aquatic therapy program is to provide a means for full fitness potential, recreation as well as being a social outlet," says Ruth Sova, physical therapist and author of *Aquatics: The Complete Reference Guide/or Aquatic Fitness Professionals*.

"Aquatic therapy will often work a specific fitness component rather than attempt to involve all components." explains Sova.

"Participants recovering from injury or surgery may need to work toward muscular endurance. Patients with gait problems may need to work strength or flexibility. The medical professional should understand that the decreased muscular strength or range of motion resulting from chronic disease may not be significantly increased. Decreased strength from disuse can be improved."

"Participants involved in aquatic therapy realize an abundance of benefits. They are able to move in the water without pain and without getting hurt. Physical fitness levels often increase and self-image will improve. Additional therapeutic benefits of water therapy include relaxation, variable resistance through limitless joint angles and planes of movement and an increase in abilities of daily living.

"In creating an aquatic therapy program for patients, standard rehabilitation progression should be followed. Participants should first work toward decreased pain and swelling and then toward increased range of motion and flexibility. Maintaining or increasing muscular endurance and strength and then regaining balance should follow. The ability to increase or maintain cardio-respiratory fitness would be the final goal of the program."

Says Sova: "As with any exercise program, participants should begin slowly. Gentle rhythmic movements or calisthenics using their full range of motion and emphasizing flexibility should begin the program. Walking in different water depths while taking notice of balance, gait, and proper ambulation can follow. Increasing the walk to an easy jog is a natural progression after that."

Aquatic therapy professionals use a wide variety of flotation and resistant devices that enhance programming. Many disabling conditions can be compensated for by matching the individual to the proper piece of equipment. Flotation vests and ankle cuffs have been used on patients with varying disabilities; resistance equipment ranging from mild resistance (aqua gloves) to extremely resistant are also in use in different aquatic therapy settings.

Access from the deck into the pool must be convenient for all participants. Stairs with well-designed handrails and nonskid surface treatments on the pool deck should all be included in the therapy pool. Stationary water powered lifts and newer battery powered mobile lifts are currently available to provide safe and convenient access.

Adolph Kiefer believes that facilities need to offer "safe water," areas that include ADA compliant equipment. Improvements in access, entry and egress from the pool as well as safe decking are essential to success.

Says Kiefer: "Getting people to the pool and in the

24 | Illinois Parks and Recreation

IS YOUR AQUATIC FACILITY READY FOR EVERYONE?

water can, for people with disabilities, be very difficult and hard on them.

"Providing as easy a way for them to get into and out of the water is critical, if someone has a bad experience at something, they won't come back at all. If we're talking about physical therapy, every consideration for the patients' comfort must be taken for the treatment to be successful."

Adds Kiefer: "Aquatic therapists have recently advanced some wonderful new and innovative methods for treating Fibromyalgia, orthopedic problems and other fatigue syndrome diseases."

"Many facilities are hiring personnel to head their own aquatic therapy and fitness specific programs.

"Aquatic therapy has only recently started to gain its momentum. Not only is it about treatment to people who need basic physical therapy and fitness; it's also about helping those with special needs. These people can sometimes feel intimidated by the everyday user who is more able-bodied. The pool is one place where they can gain self-esteem, move for themselves. Many paralyzed people say the only times they feel like a normal or whole person is when they're swimming or in the pool. It's that important for them.

"If an aquatics program is to be truly successful, there's a reason to make sure your program meets the needs of everyone." □

MARK BLANK

is a writer in the Chicago area who has written numerous articles on health and safety issues for various health, sports and fire/rescue publications.

RUTH SOVA, M.S.

is founder of the Aquatic Exercise Association, an international association of aquatic professionals. She is certified by the Institute for Aerobic Research and gold certified by IDEA. She is an internationally known speaker, author and consultant on fitness, choreography, aquatic exercise, and the business side of fitness.

Adolph Kiefer and Associates

is the president and owner of Adolph Kiefer and Associates, a provider of swimming equipment and apparel offering swimmers and the world of aquatics "everything but the water" since 1947. The company has been an aquatics supplier to every Olympic Games since 1948. Kiefer set a new world record winning the gold medal for the 100-meter backstroke at the 1936 Berlin Games, in 1960, he was appointed to John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on Fitness and Industry, and was a member of the first group to be inaugurated into the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Kiefer has devoted his life to the pursuit of excellence in all facets of swimming. For more information, Adolph Kiefer and Associates, 800-323-4071 or www.kiefer.com.

An SRA Perspective on Aquatic Therapy

Sarah Trembly, program manager at the Main/Niles Association of Special Recreation in Skokie, oversees their curriculum for people with special needs that is comprised of three basic programs: lessons, swim team and aqua aerobics. The swimming lesson classes are offered for people with disabilities of all ages, children to adult. The swim teams are for adults with mental impairment and are done in association with Special Olympics. The aqua aerobics program is for adults of varying physical impairments such as stroke, head injury, and orthopedic problems.

"The greatest challenge is in programming—trying to make the experience as fun as it can be to keep the swimmers interested and returning," says Trembly.

"The pool provides these individuals with an alternative to land-based therapy. The difference in atmosphere is maybe the most important aspect of aquatic therapy because people simply do not equate water and being in the pool with therapy. Therapy is oftentimes something they know as hard, difficult and painful; something they never look forward to doing. When they're in the pool they think of their time in the water as fun or even recreation. It's natural, a natural place, so they intuitively relax and honestly enjoy themselves. Arduous tasks like lifting weights and stretching are so much easier in water since the body's weight is reduced by buoyancy.

Trembly says; "The biggest problem is that pools are so busy, and there are so many things happening at once, it can be difficult to get water space."

"Finding room to work with people while everyday users are recreating is hard."

Many pool facilities with or without aquatic therapy programs may be equipped with lift equipment or special wider steps for getting in and out of the water.

Says Trembly: "A person who needs to use a pool lift generally has more discomfort than someone who can walk down stairs. Also it is sometimes awkward to transfer a participant onto an pool lift. We try our best to provide as much comfort as we can in these instances.

"Our aquatic therapy programs have really grown over the past year, particularly the aqua aerobics classes for both people with disabilities and for able-bodied people as well," adds Trembly, "As the popularity for these programs increases, more pool facilities with designated therapy areas or special therapy pools will be needed."

--Mark Blank

January/February 2000 | 25

[|Back to Periodicals Available|](#) [|Table of Contents|](#) [|Back to Illinois Issues 2000|](#)