

# RESEARCH UPDATE



# Save Our Pools

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**For over 18 years I've had the honour of working in the field of hydrotherapy. As manager and clinical specialist of the service in Portsmouth I was also able to help design and then run the new hydrotherapy pool that was built as part of our hospital redevelopment in 2007.**

Seeing first-hand the great benefit AS patients gain from hydrotherapy has inspired me to continue developing services. Incorporating hydrotherapy treatments and access to our pool has been at the forefront of our work in the area. In my naivety it took some time to realise the AS "hydrotherapy bubble" in which I work is not what others experience across the country. I've heard more and more stories of no, or limited, hydrotherapy access for

AS patients. A growing postcode lottery of hydrotherapy access has been seen in the UK with a number of pools closed.

In 2017 the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published the first guidelines for the diagnosis and management of AS. It referenced the use of hydrotherapy as an adjunct therapy for those with AS. Supported by many research articles about the benefits of hydrotherapy for those with AS, the

guidelines were greatly welcomed. However, in the same few weeks my colleague, Mel Martin, learnt of another NHS hydrotherapy pool closure in London. Feeling a sense of frustration and concern about our hydrotherapy services for AS patients, Mel led the charge to look at this further within AStretch (a not for profit group of Chartered Physiotherapists with a special interest and working in the field of AS).

# Save Our Pools

In September 2017 Mel and I gratefully received funding from the NASS research fund to look at NHS hydrotherapy provision for the management of AS. We carried out two surveys:

- 1. Hydrotherapy service providers** - physiotherapists who manage or work within NHS hydrotherapy departments
- 2. People with AS**

**Our aims were to:**

- Map the current NHS hydrotherapy services for AS across the country including how the services are run
- Gain a greater understanding of patients and NASS members experience of hydrotherapy.

In total we had a fantastic 250 individual completed surveys from NASS members and those with AS.

Two thirds (66%) of the respondents had experienced NHS hydrotherapy, being mainly referred by their rheumatology team. In most cases hydrotherapy treatment was attended on a weekly basis with

multiple perceived benefits including improvements in stiffness, mobility/ flexibility and mood being rated as the top 3.

Respondents gave an average of 7.7 out of 10 (10 being the best score) when asked how much hydrotherapy complemented their overall AS care. Being able to have hydrotherapy

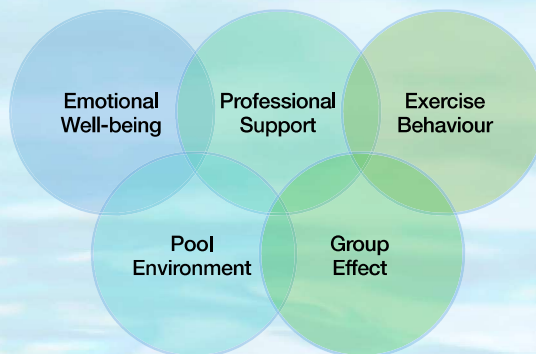
treatment quickly when in flare can be vital to those with AS but only 30% were able to take advantage of fast access schemes in their local area. A number experienced barriers including long wait times and limited treatment sessions.





**There were 5 themes:**

- 1) **Emotional well being** – exercising in water providing a greater sense of condition control
- 2) **Exercise behaviour** – the water providing a greater opportunity to exercise with more variety, intensity and challenge
- 3) **Group effect** – a gained sense of support from others
- 4) **Professional support** – a chance to talk to the experts and discuss problems
- 5) **Pool environment** – being able to access the warm water



77 respondents were advised to continue hydrotherapy independently but only a relatively small number of patients received written exercise resources to help achieve this.

35 attended a pay-as-you-go scheme in their NHS hydrotherapy pool and 119 would be interested in a scheme like this. This indicates a demand for hydrotherapy pools that could help protect their operation. Respondents were very clear that using a local community pool was difficult due to high costs, low pool water temperatures and overcrowding.

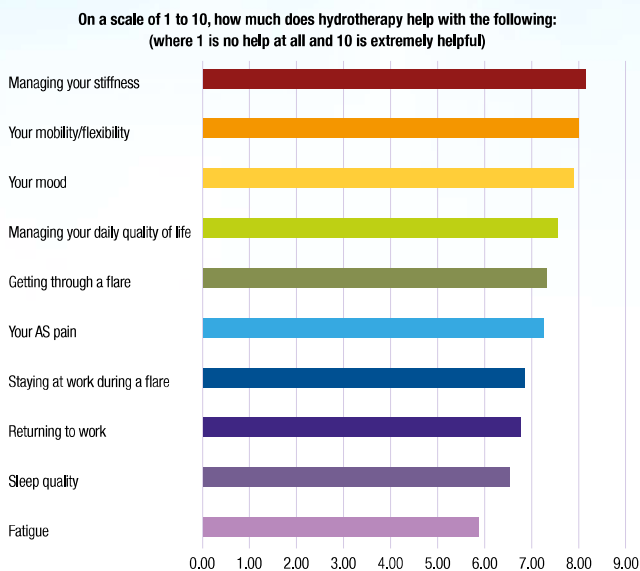
Thinking specifically about NASS branches, 62 out of 82 had use of a hydrotherapy pool as part of their branch. The majority of the time (74%) was an NHS hydrotherapy pool.

Mel and I would like to send an individual thank you to all of you who kindly took the time to complete our survey and for encouraging others to complete it. The results have given us invaluable information about how you feel hydrotherapy offers you benefit for your AS and how

much you value the services or access that you do have. We heard in volumes as well from those of you who are not as lucky to have access to hydrotherapy, or had access in the past but sadly have it no longer.

These results have given us key messages and insights that we feel we can put forward as supporting evidence for the continued use of hydrotherapy. The results may also help us propose NHS service developments that may in some part help units support the ongoing operation of their hydrotherapy pools

Mel and I have been honoured to present some of the results of the surveys at multiple healthcare meetings including the British Society Rheumatology conference, the European League Against Rheumatism and the Northwest Ankylosing Spondylitis Special interest network group. We will continue to spread the word far and wide over the coming months and are starting to map the NHS hydrotherapy pools offering access to AS patients as part of their NHS care or NASS group.



**If you did not complete one of our survey's but want to ensure your NHS hydrotherapy pool is on our map then please email us directly at [hydroproject@astretch.co.uk](mailto:hydroproject@astretch.co.uk). Simply tell us:**

- 1) the name of the hospital or facility that you go to for your NHS hydrotherapy pool
- 2) the regional location of the NHS hydrotherapy pool that you attend ie: Warwick, Yeovil, Oxford etc
- 3) Why you attend the NHS hydrotherapy pool using one or both if applicable, of the following in your answer :
  - I attend for NHS hydrotherapy treatment
  - I attend for NASS group hydrotherapy