



# AQUATIC RESOURCES NETWORK <sup>SM</sup>

## Speech Therapy Goes Undercover, Underwater

A guest article by Susan B. Nachimson, SLP, NDT, WATSU Practitioner

"Speech therapy in water?" "Really!"  
"Are you kidding?"

I'll bet many of you reading this newsletter don't have any trouble envisioning speech therapy in the water. Why? You've logged many therapy hours in warm water and have had more success with patients' vocalizing than the Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP) did!

You, however, are not the "norm". The rest of the world doesn't understand. A speech pathologist who ventures into warm pools (for, let's say, the purpose of increasing respiration to support efficient vocalizations) has a great hurdle to overcome.

### In the Beginning

For my first "aquatic" case, I first invited a 2½ year old client with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy into an aquatic setting because he was unhappy on land. His stiff body inhibited all movements and vocalizations. He appeared to understand a lot, but was unable to be independent even though he demanded independence. He hit frequently and screamed whenever he could access his voice. But his mom told me he laughed and was happy in his bath.

There was a nearby center for people with disabilities that housed an Olympic sized pool heated over 90° F. The double wheelchair ramp was a perfect place for a young child to stabilize while experiencing the water. This little boy scooted himself towards deeper levels immediately, not worrying about going under water. He quickly demonstrated breath control and wanted to go deeper into the water. He loved being passed back and forth between his mom and me and actually swam underwater between us within minutes of becoming familiar with going under and coming up for air.

What's more, he used all 4 extremities while underwater and when he surfaced, he squealed with delight with a clear, unblocked voice. Over and over again. Before the session ended, he was able to swim the width of the pool underwater with his mom on one side and me on the other to catch him and turn him around to go back the other way. This was the breaking ground for my realization that water was powerful in making changes in respiration (to support vocalization) as well as being an ideal environment for people with physical limitations.

My next experience was with another boy who was ambulatory, legally blind with spastic quadriplegia, and major hypersensitivity throughout his body. My task was to help him increase oral feeding skills and develop receptive and expressive communication and speech. Wow! What an order. The only thing this 4 year old enjoyed was water and starting and stopping the washer and dryer. One day, while playing in the sink at his house, I noticed a spa on the deck on the other side of the living room. We began using the spa. In one year's time this child progressed from severe hypersensory recoiling reactions, to allowing water to touch his face with loss of breath control and general terror, to being able to jump into the water and submerge with competent breath control and enjoyment. In fact, he outgrew the spa and we began to go to a larger warm pool to work on swimming and relaxation.

These two experiences became the foundation for my decision to continue aquatic therapy. I was not as lucky as the therapists of today. I had no knowledge of people working in water except for some traditional PT approaches I had seen for aquatic gait training. My patients had to teach me to trust my "water instincts".

### Learning From a Patient

Recently a 12 year old student who comes



Susan at work in the speech spa!

for speech therapy for articulation and language limitations (secondary to hearing impairment) asked me when she was going to speech therapy in the spa. I paired her with a same-aged boy with cerebral palsy. I laminated a language lesson appropriate for both of them. My job was to support the boy in water and her job was to handle the laminated lessons. The goal for the session was: Expanding descriptive language and articulation of target sounds. It was incredible how we were able to stay on task using things hanging on the walls of my spa-room to expand sentence length and increase the richness of a sentence. All the while, the boy I was floating (using some non-invasive WATSU techniques) increased fluency, reduced self consciousness by discovering a peer with similar language needs and generally had a great time. I

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would never have listed language therapy, specifically, on a list of areas addressed by aquatic therapy practices. Sometimes a client teaches the process. So, when someone asks me what I do for speech therapy in water, I have to chuckle and say it is up to my client's particular needs.

### Liability

I carry general liability insurance and professional liability so that I am covered wherever I treat according to my professional organizations suggestions. I have been certified by the American Red Cross with the Swim Coaches Safety and First Aid Certificate. All public pools in California have lifeguards on duty. Private pools do not need lifeguards. I recommend an aquatic therapist of any type having some kind of water safety course.

### Billing and Reimbursement

My billing procedures are standard. One insurance company accepts regular HCFA codes for speech therapy. Medicaid doesn't question what I am billing for and accepts the speech therapy codes that have been around since I began billing them.

I won't say there haven't been some problems. A year ago, I was challenged by an organization that pays for therapies for clients with developmental disabilities. I was told that aquatic therapy for speech therapy was not a normal "standard of practice". Even though my professional organization supported me in my practice, I was still not accepted by this organization.

### Aquatic CME for SLPs

So, what did I do? I stuck out my neck and created an aquatic CME course that has been taught twice in California. There are now 14 SLPs who have each received 16 graduate hours recognized by the Speech Pathology and Audiology Examining

Committee (SPAEC) of the Board of Medical Examiners in California. This class also satisfies the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) requirements as a professional development course.

The class is taught exclusively to SLPs by me and Jerry McCue, CMT, who is a WATSU instructor and a founding member of the Worldwide Aquatic Bodyworkers Association (WABA). In these classes we teach basic aquatic therapy techniques (Ai Chi and balancing exercises). We work in water that is at least 94° F in order to break up spasticity.

We created a WATSU flow that utilizes the principles of ribcage expansion and lung releases for fuller and easier breathing for those clients who would be good candidates for this type of treatment. We use live models provided by the participants in the areas the courses are held so that the differences

between treating children and adults become clearly defined. We are creating a schedule for 2003 and will post dates on the ARN listserv and in this newsletter as soon as possible.

### Susan's Ideas for Aquatic ST:

- Blow small floating balls or other toys;
- Point to different areas in the pool and say new words;
- Call to a friend across the pool to practice audible voicing;
- Splash and challenge a sensitive body to accept new feelings of water all over the body, face and head.
- Stretch or relax during WATSU or Jahara techniques (for those who have mobility limitations or hyperactivity);
- Play with washcloths, PVC pipe connectors, squeeze toys, balls and many other toys that splash water up into the face;
- Keep in mind that all of these tasks are done while immersed -- which means that a steady pressure of water on the ribcage facilitates will increase ribcage expansion and intake of air into the lungs.

### Conclusion

I hope this anecdotal blast from the desk of an SLP has kindled some interest and provided some understanding of how a "speechie" uses aquatic therapy to address client's goals.

I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank Peggy Schoedinger, PT, who encouraged me via email through our WATSU people-connections to pursue my course, regardless of my feelings of inferiority. You were my guiding light through this process.

Please feel free to contact me for any information I can help get to you. And please share with colleagues your new understanding of the natural connection between speech and warm water therapy!

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