

SWIMMING 365

They can't wait to leap off the blocks, their HbA1c levels are under control and they keep coming back. Here is chronic disease management in action.

Swimming 365 is a program run by Diabetes WA, Swimming WA, UniSwim and UWA Exercise & Performance aiming to put the brakes on Metabolic Syndrome. If you're a professional working in the mental health sector then you know all about the difficulty of sustaining enthusiasm and attendance rates in a group setting. Jenny (who did not want to be identified) is 62-years-old and has had type 2 Diabetes since 2002.

"A diagnosis can feel a bit like a sentence, suddenly you've got all these restrictions and things you should and shouldn't do. But Swimming 365 is very empowering and it's done in manageable chunks with lots of positive feedback. It actually makes me feel quite heroic."

"We all have fairly large girths associated with metabolic syndrome and, to be honest, most of us would never have been seen dead in our swimming costumes. But we feel very comfortable now as we tackle this problem together. There's the added bonus that the program is individually designed for us, it's a privilege to receive all this training and professional expertise."

The participants are all registered with Diabetes WA, which is where they heard about Swimming 365, and they are then required to talk about the program with their own GP. First-term fees are covered by Medicare and negotiations are taking place with private health funds to cover some of the ongoing charges.

"The '365' is there for a reason because we're encouraged to continue right through winter. It burns more fat swimming during the colder

months, apparently. I was in the inaugural group that started in February 2015 with Aqua Aerobics and low-impact cardio workouts run by exercise physiologists," Jenny said.

"My HbA1C levels are under 6.6, I'm not taking any medication and managing nicely with a combination of diet and exercise. Swimming 365 makes me feel wonderful, we're all swimming nearly 6km a week and I certainly feel slimmer."

The man behind the wheel of Swimming 365 is Tom Picton-Warlow and to say he's enthusiastic about the program would be an understatement.

"We've had a highly successful first year of operation with strong participation and retention rates. Our focus is always to provide value for the participants with a holistic approach incorporating exercise and diet."

"Diabetes WA provides an accredited dietitian to give nutritional advice, UWA Exercise and Performance have an accredited exercise physiologist and the coaches from Swimming UWA and UniSwim have expertise and links right through to FINA."

"The nutritional component is extremely important and regular exercise gets the participants thinking about food in a different way. Australians are carrying more excess weight than ever before and a combination of professional instruction, exercise and increased knowledge will, hopefully, go some way to address the rising incidence of Metabolic Syndrome."

Tom is ideally placed to head-up Swimming 365.

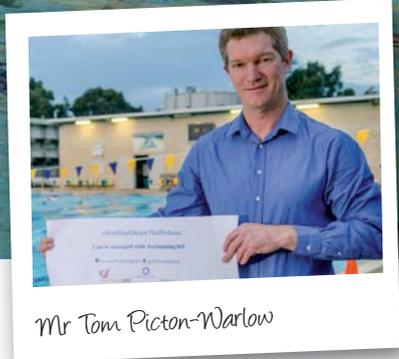


Dr Bonnie Furzer

"I was a director on the boards of Swimming Australia and Swimming WA from 2010-15 and it was obvious that getting into the pool and exercising could play a significant role in people's health. We're blessed to have so many great places here from the Swan River, to public pools and the Indian Ocean. Swimming is part of our cultural DNA."

"We're so pleased with the outcomes. We've got four people from the group with Type 2 who are competing as a team in the 20km Port-to-Pub Swim [Fremantle to Rotttnest], which will be a fabulous achievement."

The 'science' behind the program is provided by UWA Exercise Physiologist Dr Bonnie Furzer who has a research interest in the



Mr Tom Picton-Warlow

pairing of exercise and chronic disease.

“My PhD thesis focused on cancer patients. I’m interested in the design of exercise programs that help with healthy function, whether it’s a patient presenting with the side-effects of treatment or a chronic disease. Swimming 365 is a unique program, the combination of structured exercise and hydrotherapy in this context is a novel one and the results have been pleasing.”

“It’s often quite difficult to encourage people who may not have been all that active in the past. We weren’t sure how an older group would cope with that. We’ve had great compliance and a retention rate in excess of

80%, they keep coming to the sessions and they re-enrol for the next semester. They’re obviously seeing sufficient benefits to keep jumping into the pool and that’s heartening from a health perspective.”

Bonnie was involved at the planning stage of the program.

“About 18 months ago UWA academic staff involved with swimming partnered with us here at Exercise and Performance and the aim was to design a structured program that had an emphasis on progression and was able to be medically assessed. It was also important to have a strong liaison with a participant’s GP.”

“There are many complex factors linked with Metabolic Syndrome, it’s far too simplistic to say it is one thing or another. The critical factor is that an individual can learn how to make a difference in managing their health and see where they fit within the spectrum of their disease.”

“There are just so many potential benefits from structured exercise.” ●

By Mr Peter McClelland

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