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## **STATEMENT FROM DR. ALISON KERR ON THE IMPORTANCE OF HYDROTHERAPY FOR RETT GIRLS AND WOMEN**

Hydrotherapy is one of the most essential of the physical therapies for this group of profoundly disabled people. There are several reasons for the importance of this form of therapy, each of which relates to the nature of the disorder:-

- 1) Rett syndrome produces a movement disorder which deprives the individual of the freedom to plan and carry out voluntary movement. This means that walking is never secure and sometimes impossible. Spontaneous movement in water is much more attainable and therefore swimming and other forms of movement in water remain possible when other forms of mobility deteriorate.
- 2) The difficulties which lead to the movement problem include fear which seems to be induced by perceptual difficulties when a girl finds herself balanced some distance above the ground. Proximity to the surface of the water and its support of her limbs appear to diminish this fear allowing her to find confidence in walking on the base of the pool and steering herself round even if she is not swimming.
- 3) Cold and noise cause fear and withdrawal in these girls and exacerbate the involuntary disorder of movement (hand stereotypy and breathing irregularity). A warm, quiet and well supported position in the pool is essential before active learning can take place.
- 4) Rett people, although they do not have a progressive disease, are particularly liable to lose muscle bulk, strength and flexibility because the brain is not capable of using the existing nerve pathways in a normal fashion and this leads to poor internal nutrition of the tissues. Health of muscle and nerve requires active movement, however the movement repertoire available to the Rett person in the air is very restricted and becomes increasingly so as the years pass. This problem cannot be overcome by daily physiotherapy alone since only passive movement can be achieved in this way and it is in water that the fullest range can be achieved.

In summary, hydrotherapy is essential because it supplies the support of water deep enough to stand and broad enough to swim in a warm, quiet environment under the guidance and within the secure care of the physiotherapist. The water invites and assists the movements of the motor disabled person as no other medium can. Daily hydrotherapy with good physiotherapy support should therefore be one of the core facilities for Rett people at all ages. I hope this is perfectly clear and I will be pleased to answer any queries which arise.

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