Taking the plunge
Osteopathy takes to the water

Keeping active can be challenging for patients with persistent pain, but it is also essential to managing their condition and staying healthy. We speak to Ben Wilkins, co-founder and Clinical Director of Fluid Motion, a water-based rehabilitation programme that has evolved from a helping-hand for two patients struggling with conventional exercise, to a Swim England supported pilot programme.

In 2014, osteopath Ben Wilkins, alongside physiotherapy students Alun Bonello and Hilary Smith, and Medical student Annie Archer came up with the idea for Fluid Motion. With the limited availability of specialist hydrotherapy pools on the NHS, and the expense of accessing these privately, they were looking to develop an affordable, flexible method that allowed patients to undertake treatment tailored for their individual needs, at their local swimming pool.

Why did you decide to start Fluid Motion?

I was struggling to get some patients to do exercise. For some, the pain they were experiencing was preventing them from being more active. For others, the idea of going to the gym or for a jog in the park didn’t appeal. I suggested to a few of my patients that, if they were willing, we could meet at the local swimming pool and I could lead them through some exercises.

The idea was that for many people a pool is a relaxing environment, and a much less intimidating setting to do some exercise, particularly considering that the fear of pain was a barrier to many of them. We’ve had people needing wheelchairs or walking supports to get into the pool, then finding themselves confident and comfortable enough to be jumping around in the pool, doing things that would never have been possible on land.

It grew quite quickly to the point where the pool insisted we book some lanes for the sessions, as the group was getting too big. But with this group getting larger, we had to find a way to give people exercises that met their individual needs and abilities. They each had different conditions they were seeking to improve, so it couldn’t be a generic exercise class, it needed to be tailored.
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For the first year we had exercise plans on laminated plastic cards, which worked for a while but wasn’t very practical longer term as the programme grew. We got funding from NHS Innovation to trial the use of tablet computers, waterproof of course, and we developed a basic app that reflected much of the content of the existing cards. Any concerns we had about our older patients struggling to use the tablets were unfounded, everyone was fine using it.

We developed the app to use AI to guide people through training programmes in line with their condition and how they are progressing, so there doesn’t need to be a healthcare professional present to use it. The app also collects feedback to help guide ongoing improvements.

What are the next stages for developing the programme?
We’re now working with Swim England to run a 15 pool, 12-month pilot from late summer, looking to see if this is something that could be rolled out across the country. It’ll see whether we can train pool staff to oversee the programme, and where Fluid Motion could fit in the patient pathway. We’re also rebranding as ‘Good Boost’ within the next month.

People will pay about the same as they would for a swim. They will then be assessed by a trained instructor, using the software. They’ll be given a tablet to use during the session, and their own account which then guides them as their treatment develops.

The ambition is that any patient with a condition that would benefit from water-based rehabilitation will be able to access this at a local pool, and the model is flexible enough that a 19-year-old with a rugby injury could attend the same session as an 80-year-old recovering from a falls fracture, which makes the system very efficient, adaptable, and affordable to run.

There’s quite a lot of enthusiasm for the project, swimming numbers are actually in decline, so pools and organisations like Swim England are looking to re-engage people to use these facilities, even if it isn’t for swimming.

We’ve also been collecting data to guide the development of the programme, but going forward as part of the new pilot programme, we will be working with an academic partner to provide a full clinical evaluation.

How could osteopaths make use of the programme?
Firstly, to find out more they can visit our website, www.fluid-motion.org.uk. We will also be contacting the local healthcare community as the pilot and any subsequent roll out occurs, inviting them to introduce the programme to their patients.

There will also be an option, if the patient consents, for an osteopath to access the data stored on their account. This will tell them everything from the exercises being undertaken to the pain level feedback, allowing this to be a practical, interactive tool that can engaged with their overall treatment plan, not a stand-alone activity.

For further patient information on the management of persistent pain, visit the IO website at: www.iosteopathy.org/osteopathy-for-health/understanding-and-managing-persistent-pain

Ben Wilkins - Co-founder and Clinical Director of Fluid Motion

Ben is a registered osteopath and a practising Aquatic Therapist. He is a post-grad at the University of Oxford, and a Masters of Osteopathy graduate of Oxford Brookes University. He was awarded the Santander Scholarship for Social Enterprise in 2014.

In 2015 Ben was awarded the High Sheriff’s Award for dedication to the communities of Oxfordshire, and was also shortlisted by the Institute of Osteopathy in the ‘Associate of the Year’ and ‘Excellence in Research and Clinical Practice’ awards.

The Fluid Motion tablets