



Hydrotherapy Services to the ACT

Budget Submission

Purpose

To seek adequate funding for Arthritis ACT to continue to meet current levels of hydrotherapy in the ACT.

Background

Arthritis ACT have been providing low-cost hydrotherapy in the ACT for more than 30years. Until 2020 614 sessions of hydrotherapy were funded per annum. Since March 2020 this has been increased to 1350 sessions per annum, with 714 of these sessions being held on the Southside. In 2023 Arthritis ACT delivered 2,805 self-lead hydrotherapy sessions (of 45-60 minutes in length each). These sessions are split almost evenly between UCH and a group of pools on the Southside. In addition, Arthritis ACT hosted 135 'instructor lead' hydrotherapy sessions, supporting those that are unable to follow or afford the creation of a self-lead program. 2 sessions per week of these sessions were held at UCH and one at Calwell 'Aquatic Achievers' pool.

Pool sessions are supervised by 2 staff, with at least one staff member generally being an allied health practitioner. There is often one member of staff member 'in water' whilst the other remains 'on deck' to ensure safety for those attending the sessions.

The oldest person currently attending hydrotherapy is 94 years, and 2/3 of participants are of 65 years. All participants identify as having at least one chronic disease, and most have chronic pain conditions, major mobility disabilities, and approximately 60% of attendees have a comorbidity of a mental health condition (mostly depressive and/or anxiety disorders).

Current Accessibility

Arthritis ACT have recently had to close the books to new clients attending UCH as UCH sessions are limited to 1 session per week to all current participants at that pool, with the majority wishing to participate at least twice per week. 297 participants have 'permanent' positions and approximately an equivalent number seek to find a gap or

cancellation in the remaining 53 spots which we keep aside for this group. If a participant wishes to utilise Southside pools there is more accessibility however there are still participants who can not access the number of sessions of hydrotherapy that they require for their ongoing health and wellbeing needs.

Funding Considerations

At the last review of the cost of delivering hydrotherapy in early 2020, consideration was made to ensure funding met the requirements of 2 staff at 14 sessions per week on the Southside (travel for staff not included) and 1 staff member at UCH. Over the past 4 years staffing requirements by UCH have increased so that 2 staff members are required to attend sessions (as one must be on deck and often a second is required in the water to assist frailer clients). To meet safety requirements at least one staff member for each session needs to travel from our offices as it is not possible to retain allied health staff for 2 hour shift only and under the award all staff must be employed for a minimum of 3 hours. Funding does not meet these minimum requirements.

Clients make a co-contribution to hydrotherapy to the amount of \$6 per session and an annual membership fee of \$49. 69.8% of clients pay this fee, and approximately 50% of clients pay the ongoing membership fee (with approximately 70% paying the fee initially).

If all clients paid all fees most pool sessions still operate at a loss in terms of fees raised.

On a recent review of hydrotherapy it costs approximately \$25 per person to participate in the program with the level of administration, cost of insurance, staffing, pool hire charges, travel for staff to sites, and staffing at the actual sessions. Arthritis ACT is currently carrying a deficit of around \$100,000 per annum to continue the program at the current level of service.

Previous funding sources

In the past Arthritis ACT have been able to absorb the increasing cost of hydrotherapy through bequests, fundraising, other funding sources that have been secured. Over the past 4 years all previous resources have been exhausted through limitations of services imposed through the epidemic and a reduction in other funding sources and fundraising as the cost of living crisis deepens. In addition Government CPI raises for the cost of providing services have not kept up with the actual cost of service delivery.

Commissioning Process

For the past 4 years we have been told there would be no further funding available for services including increasing services or changing outputs due to the commissioning process. In late 2023 Arthritis ACT received the notice that it's services are too unique and as a very small agency it was understood that a commissioning process was an

unfair burden on work upon it. Whilst we agree that this is a good decision, it has taken away the opportunity to properly cost services and present Government with a true cost and community need for delivering hydrotherapy services.

Budget Implications

In 2020 14 sessions per week at a pool that we pay for the use of and 2 staff was costed out. In 23/24 this equates to \$286,746.52 of which pool hire costs are \$100,766.82. The rest is staffing, travel to venue, administration and equipment.

Secondary sites utilised include the Calvary John James Hospital Pool who kindly provide the pool to the community at no cost, however all other costs must be met by Arthritis ACT. As a smaller pool the capacity is much lower so the possibility of covering the cost of staffing at this pool through client contributions even if all clients did pay the \$6 entry is impossible. This pool however currently provides a further 13 sessions per week or 650 sessions per annum and 5,200 individual client sessions. Through the use of this pool as well as Aqua Harmony and Calwell we are able to meet the 3 times a week average usage of hydrotherapy that clients generally need on the southside if they are willing to work with the times and locations available.

To continue to operate at the Calvary John James and the extra sessions provided at the UCH pool at the current offering of sessions Arthritis ACT requests an injection of \$100,000 per annum to cover the cost of service delivery.

Currently Arthritis ACT provide 1750 sessions at UCH per year which is 1136 sessions over the 614 that are funded. With the addition of the Calvary John James pool sessions there are 1786 sessions per year currently offered over and above the current funding provided. This equates to a \$56 per pool session cost asked to ensure this program can continue to operate at the current level of service in the ACT.

Arthritis ACT will not be able to absorb this budget shortfall any longer and going forward, without this increased funding, will be forced to reduce low cost hydrotherapy in the ACT back to the funded sessions only.