DEBUSE, DOROTHÉE :

An Exploration of German and UK Physiotherapists’ view on the Effects of Hippotherapy and their Measurement.

Hippotherapy has been practised by UK and German physiotherapists for many years. A questionnaire survey was used to identify general working practices and environments in both countries and most importantly, practitioners’ perceptions as to the main effects of hippotherapy on patients with cerebral palsy and how these effects are measured.

Responses were received from 17 (81%) of UK and 53 (58%) of German physiotherapists surveyed. Whilst differences in practices and environment exist within, and between these countries, the consensus amongst respondents as to the benefit of hippotherapy to children with cerebral palsy is strikingly high. Respondents found a normalisation of muscle tone to be the main effect of hippotherapy, followed by improvement in postural/trunk control, and in third place, psychological benefits. The survey also showed that the majority of respondents either did not measure the effects they proposed are the main benefits of hippotherapy to patients with cerebral palsy or chose not to comment.

The findings are in broad agreement with published studies. The survey identified the lack of consistent measurement of therapeutic outcome which highlights the relative absence of validated, published outcome measures used in hippotherapy. The consequent lack of scientific evidence to support hippotherapy is threatening the availability of this treatment modality. In Germany funding for hippotherapy has already been cut. It is now up to the professions involved in delivering hippotherapy to provide the evidence for its effects. Such evidence must be based on robust measurement of therapeutic outcome.