

Chapter 5

Watsu® In Aquatic Rehabilitation

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At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Describe the historical origins of Watsu.
- Describe the physiologic benefits of Watsu.
- Describe patient populations for whom Watsu might be appropriate.
- Describe potential outcomes of using Watsu clinically.
- Describe potential risks when utilizing Watsu.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For nearly 100 years aquatic therapy has progressed with the continual development and refinement of equipment and techniques to benefit patients in countless ways. The progress has been like a tree expanding and growing branch after branch with remarkable benefits for patients. Then in the early 1980s an entirely new tree, known as aquatic bodywork, emerged and flourished, with Watsu as the main trunk. In the field of aquatic rehabilitation, Watsu presented exciting new ways for therapists to treat patients in the water. Watsu and the evolving forms of related aquatic bodywork have propelled aquatic therapy into an entirely new direction - one that has added immensely to the benefits of aquatic rehabilitation for a wide variety of patient populations.

In the early 1980s Harold Dull, with his background in creative arts, poetry and English teaching, had been studying Shiatsu for five years with Zen Shiatsu master Masunaga. At the time, Dull was teaching at the School of Shiatsu and Massage at Harbin Hot Springs in California. He began creatively experimenting and adapting Zen Shiatsu's meridian stretches for people while he was floating them in the warm water pools at Harbin. He also incorporated Zen Shiatsu's emphasis on connecting with the breathing pattern of each receiver and establishing a meditative presence during sessions.

Dull discovered that this adapted Shiatsu in warm water induced deep relaxation and affected people profoundly at physical and emotional levels. Soon Dull's work evolved into its own unique form of aquatic bodywork, which was named Watsu for its combination of water and Shiatsu.

Dull's background was not in a medically oriented field, and his original volunteers for practicing and developing Watsu were primarily the massage practitioners and yoginis who lived and worked at Harbin Hot Springs. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, physical therapists and other traditional healthcare providers began to utilize Watsu and adapt it for their