

NARRATIVE ESSAY

The Pool Club

Robin O. Winter, MD, MMM^{a,b}

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS:

^aDepartment of Family Medicine,
Hackensack Meridian School of
Medicine, Nutley, NJ

^bDepartment of Family Medicine,
Hackensack Meridian JFK University
Medical Center, Edison, NJ, United
States

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Robin O. Winter, Department of
Family Medicine, Hackensack
Meridian School of Medicine, Nutley,
NJ,
robinw310@gmail.com

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I hear the sound of an imaginary factory whistle going off in my head. It's 5 o'clock, time to stop work, shut off my computer, put on my jacket, go to physical therapy, and transition from physician to patient. Just as I am about to leave, a colleague stops me to ask a question.

"Can it wait until tomorrow? I have to get to physical therapy."

"Sure, no problem."

Finally, I'm out the door and walk up a hill to my car. No longer having to use an accessible parking space reminds me just how far I have come in the year since total knee replacement surgery with a slower than anticipated recovery complicated by hip impingement pain and chronic back problems. I cannot wait for the day that walking on uneven surfaces, climbing stairs, and encountering other access barriers are no longer a concern.

As I pull into the physical therapy parking lot, I am relieved that there were no rush hour surprises. After signing in, I walk as fast as I can to the locker room. It took me months of physical therapy on land to be able to change into my bathing suit and water shoes on my own, a task for which I must still use a sock donner, dressing stick, and hands-free shoes that I can slip on and off to accomplish. The need for these assistive devices is an ongoing source of frustration even while I am thankful for the independence they provide. Experiencing life with physical disabilities is a humbling lesson, and I find my empathy for patients at work increasing.

A blast of warm humid air greets me when I open the door to the pool room.

"How's the water temperature today?"

"You'll like it," says the physical therapist (PT).

First comes the required warm shower. Next, I survey the therapy equipment that surrounds the pool, making sure everything I need will be within reach after I enter the water. Wet and ready, it's time to tackle my first hurdle, walking down the steps into the pool. The first few are the hardest until I'm aided by the water's buoyancy. All my muscles relax and worries of the outside world melt away as soon as I am immersed in the 92°F water.

I begin with walking exercises in the 4-foot shallow end. The water works its magic by relieving some of the pull of gravity, making it easier to walk while simultaneously offering gentle resistance to strengthen my muscles.

"How would you like to walk holding a board to increase the resistance?" asks the PT with a gentle voice and supportive look.

"I think that would be too much for me today."

"Maybe you'll give it a try another day."

The PT's warm, welcoming, nonjudgmental approach is a far cry from the drill sergeant approach of the physical therapist I worked with on land immediately following my surgery. To be fair, I needed a drill sergeant to get me to move despite the postoperative pain it caused; but having progressed as far as I could on land, this PT's active listening and gentler approach is most welcome at this point in my recovery. It also serves to enhance the warmth of the pool environment and creates a supportive Pool Club experience for all of us whose criteria for membership is the loss of being able-bodied.

A group of us who come to the pool weekly at the same time has managed to bond together while on our individual paths to recovery. Like Dorothy on the yellow brick road with the scarecrow, tin man, and lion, we help one another stay on the road to wellness despite pain or setbacks along the way. My group is a multiracial and intergenerational

mix of men and women. What I learn from this group, both personally and as a family physician, along with the support it provides are just as valuable as the physical benefits of being in the pool.

One member suffers from chronic pain, has memory lapses, and frequently uses malapropisms after a work-related life-threatening accident. He is living proof of the benefits of caring for pets and gardening; his egg-laying chickens' and rabbits' droppings fertilize a vegetable garden and lawn that supports worms used for fishing bait. I also appreciate his tenacity in fighting the international company refusing to pay his workers' compensation claim. Another group member spends his nights sleeping in a recliner due to chronic back and groin pain. Despite pain limiting the ability to stand and walk, he still works one half day a week. Hearing them talk about using medical marijuana for their chronic pain and insomnia teaches me more about the therapeutic benefits of marijuana than I ever learned reading medical journals or listening to lectures.

A member with a degenerative cerebellar disorder is inspirational to watch. Even though she looks like she is about to topple over and drown in the pool, it never happens. I find myself fighting the urge to go hold her up in the water, but I have learned to sit back and watch as the PT calmly coaches her through each exercise. When another member who wears dark glasses in the pool due to light sensitivity from a traumatic brain injury asks to turn off some of the glaring lights, the group answers in unison, "Of course!" Another day, this same member says, "The only reason I came today is because of the acceptance, smiling faces, and encouragement I get when I come." She could have been speaking for all of us.

As a family physician, I thought I already knew a lot about supporting my patients and the importance of active listening, but the Pool Club raised my understanding of these benefits to a whole new level. Struggling to overcome my own physical limitations has enabled me to care for patients with more openness, sensitivity, and acceptance of their unique circumstances than ever before, an unanticipated benefit of joining the Pool Club.