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Exercise clinic gives elderly new lease on life

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Above: Noel Ellesmere with student Henry Tang.

Elderly people living with chronic health conditions are getting a new lease on life thanks to a specialised exercise rehabilitation clinic run by staff and students from the Waikato Institute of Technology's (Wintec).

Run by Wintec's Centre for Sport Science and Human Performance, the Biokinetic Clinic is one of only a handful of its kind in the country.

It has been developed in response to the need for specialised knowledge in the emerging field of clinical exercise physiology as chronic illness, disease and injury rates among New Zealanders continue to grow.

The clinic focuses on prevention, management and rehabilitation of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, respiratory disease or chronic pain or injury. This is done by prescribing personalised exercise programmes.

Around 35 elderly people from Hamilton have signed up to the clinic attending two sessions per week. The programmes are developed and delivered by Wintec students from the centre as part of their graduate or postgraduate qualifications, under the supervision of trained staff.

Wintec's tutor and programme coordinator, Stephen Burden says it's about using specialist knowledge not only about exercise, but about the diseases and pathologies and the ways in which exercise can be applied to them. He says they're seeing some real results.

Seventy-five year old Noel Ellesmere has undergone seven surgeries, for colorectal cancer as well as knee replacements (bilateral prosthetic knees). He was experiencing chronic pain and having trouble walking even short distances, but says after six months of the programme he's seeing real benefits.

"I've found the programme so valuable. Before I came here, I could hardly move and was in a lot of pain. My doctor told me it was just something I'd have to get used to. I used to be a fitness fanatic so it was hard having to adjust, but since coming here I've noticed real improvements. It feels like everything is working together and I'm just feeling more motivated in general.

"Working with Henry is great. He's even teaching me how to improve my golf stance by using my body differently which means I can get more leverage in my hits which translates to extra distance."

Seventy year old Terry Ansell joined the programme earlier this year to lose weight. In four months, he went from 126kgs to 111kg.

"It's absolutely brilliant. I feel so much better and I have more energy," says Noel.



Wintec Graduate Diploma in Sport & Exercise Science student, Nitish Matthew with Terry Ansell.

Stephen Burden says the programme is a win-win approach for both the clients and the students. "We're helping to improve the quality of people's lives, and they're helping our students put their skills into practise through real life scenarios," he says.

"Clinical exercise physiology is not a one-size-fits-all approach. People come in with a combination of issues which need to be looked at on an individual basis in order to prescribe the appropriate exercise programme. "The experience is invaluable for our students. You can't get this sort of learning out of a text book."

Stephen, who is also on the board of Clinical Exercise Physiology New Zealand (CEPNZ), believes that training people in this area is more important than ever.

"New Zealand's population is ageing, we're facing an obesity epidemic, diabetes rates are at an all-time high and we're seeing more and more occurrences of other chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory disease.

“The impact that specialised exercise programmes can have on the prevention, management and rehabilitation of these conditions is huge, but until recently, it hasn’t been recognised as an allied health profession in New Zealand, and therefore we haven’t had the training options available.

“But there’s a real need for this. The University of Auckland estimated (based on the Australian statistics) that New Zealand needs between 700 and 800 clinical exercise physiologists.”

Stephen says that on completion of the qualifications, the postgraduate students will be trained clinical exercise physiologists.

Student, Nitish Matthew was a physiotherapist before enrolling in the Graduate Diploma in Sport and Exercise Science. He says he entered the programme as he was keen to explore more aspects of the health and fitness industry.

“At first I was kind of worried about this new syllabus. I’d had experience working with elderly clients during my physiotherapy career, but being involved in the clinic has shown me what a difference clinical exercise physiology can do for people with chronic conditions. It makes me feel proud to be moving into clinical exercise physiology,” he says.

Stephen says that although the clinic is running well, they’re looking to grow and have staff and students embedded in existing health care organisations, where programmes would be delivered on-site.

“We’re in talks with a number of health organisations and it’s likely that we’ll develop these associations in 2016,” he says.

Wintec’s Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science and Postgraduate Diploma in Sport and Exercise Science were modified in January 2015 to include criteria for clinical exercise physiology.

Around 35 students are taking part in the programme. Currently, clients are referred by health care professionals, or hear about it through word of mouth.