



Messing about in boats

A unique research program in the Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics at the University of Melbourne, is discovering sailing works wonders for disabled patients. **Annie Rahilly** reports.

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There are known health benefits to outdoor activity; on land and on sea, and now new sailing simulator technology is being used to help people disabled by spinal cord injury to learn how to sail and pick up new skills.

An added benefit to this of course, is the social interaction membership of a sailing club offers.

Professor Norman Saunders, a Developmental Neurobiologist who happens to love sailing, has been key to bringing the idea to Melbourne.

"Sailing simulators can be used to teach people with severe disabilities how to sail in a safe, well controlled environment on dry land to the point where they will be able to sail on-water, without difficulties or much apprehension," Professor Saunders says.

He says that game simulations like the sailing technology are often used in training for a variety of sports and activities.

Maree Ellul, a qualified sports and rehabilitation physiologist and teacher, is working closely with Professor Saunders and people with disabilities who attend the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre.

"We already know from centres in the United States and New Zealand that this training on land works. More than 100 people with a range of disabilities and no prior experience are out sailing on the local harbours. Early evidence indicates that involvement in a sailing program results in measurable improvements in physical and psychological well-being, morale and self esteem, as well as helping to integrate people into a social activity," Ms Ellul says.

The University of Melbourne program is slightly different from the American one, in that our researchers are making much more comprehensive measurements of the participants and we are able to carry the project through to on-water assessment.

As participants gain skills and confidence on land, they are then encouraged to sail. With the help of staff from the Docklands Sailing Club, they are winched on to a boat and left to explore Docklands Harbour on their own, but under the watchful eye of David Staley the Docklands coach.

"Safety is always a priority but our sailing mentors at Docklands are always present, and the particular boats used will not capsize," Professor Saunders says.

It is hoped that the sailing program will be extended to people with other conditions such as acquired brain injury and patients recovering from strokes.

Email Maree Ellul to find out more at:

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Watch an episode of Visions about the sailing sim project:

📺 www.visions.unimelb.edu.au/