

New program takes walking from a wheeze to a breeze

People living with chronic lung disease can breathe a little easier in Hervey Bay, thanks to an innovative pulmonary rehabilitation program.

Funded by Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN, the eight-week course is developed and delivered by Fraser Coast physiotherapist Rebecca Andrews.

“I’m an asthmatic myself and first started working on a pilot program in 2017 after treating patients living with acute lung disease in the hospital system,” Ms Andrews said.

“There is already a national program overseen by the Lung Foundation, but most are privately or public sector funded, which means there aren’t many sustainable pulmonary rehab programs for out-patients in regional centres like Hervey Bay.

“The idea for this program was to give my community a sustainable service, which in turn helps reduce the amount of hospital readmissions for this condition.”

Pulmonary rehabilitation uses exercise, education, and behavioural intervention to improve the quality of life for people living with chronic lung disease.

After an initial one-on-one assessment, participants take part in one-hour group-based exercise classes twice a week for eight weeks.

“The exercises are strength and cardiovascular based, with the biggest focus on breathing control during exertion,” Ms Andrews said.

“We use some equipment, like light weights for upper and lower limb exercises, a small chair for seated exercise and a minimum of 20 minutes of walking each session.

“There’s also a strong focus on symptom management, which means learning how to bring coughing, wheezing, or shortness of breath under control – they’re the top three symptoms.”

At the end of each course, which have been running for three years now, participants are asked to anonymously complete a satisfaction survey.

Overwhelmingly, participants report the course has helped them manage their lung condition more effectively, and met their expectations, been worthwhile, helpful, and is pitched at an appropriate level.

“If you have lung function problem, I would recommend you do this course,” said one.

“I have better lung function, my heart rate is better and also my oxygen levels are better.

“[The course has given me] the ability to walk and no longer need my electric wheelchair.”

Participants also single out Andrews, who has been a physiotherapist for nine years, as the ‘most useful aspect’ of the course.

“Rebecca is a great trainer and I would recommend her to all, she is a great asset to the program.”

For Andrews, it’s changing people’s mindsets about their own ability she finds most satisfying.

“It’s the best part of my job,” she said.

“I recently had a participant who had really negative, high expectations of the course, and it is hard yakka.

“She went from not being able to leave her house to walking around the shopping centre.

“Now, her and her husband have joined the gym and she’s continuing on that maintenance course - a great result for someone over 75.”

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IMAGE: Anne Burgess (left) takes part in a pulmonary rehabilitation session.

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