

## Water Immersion for Labour and Birth (WILB) overview of the program of research

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### BACKGROUND OF WILB

Guidelines for intrapartum care focus on optimising women's natural physiology to birth, with health services urged to promote a positive birth experience through attending to informed decision-making, respectful maternity care and facilitation of autonomy and choice for women.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence strongly substantiates water immersion as a safe and suitable option for women to relieve labour pain.<sup>2,4</sup> Improvements, especially for low-risk women when using warm water immersion, include reduced regional analgesia,<sup>2,5</sup> increased mobility and control,<sup>6</sup> lower episiotomy rates with a decreased likelihood of severe perineal injuries.<sup>7</sup> No increased harm to neonatal wellbeing has been demonstrated when women use warm water for labour and birth.<sup>2,8,9</sup>

In 2021, there were 64,111 births in Queensland. However, only 1,969 (3.1%) of births occurred in water, with slightly more women (4,005, 6.3%) using warm water immersion for pain relief.<sup>10</sup>

### BARRIERS TO PROVIDING WILB

The low uptake of this option in Queensland is likely the result of multiple complexities, including a skilled workforce to provide water immersion, hospital facilities with suitable birthing pools, practitioner bias toward this as a reputable pain relief option, and variations in local workplace policy and procedure which precludes a significant portion of women from accessing pools.<sup>11</sup>

Midwives provide one-to-one care for women during the intrapartum period and have a key role in advocacy and supporting women to access choices they prefer for pain relief and birth. Care providers' experience and confidence in facilitating water immersion for labour and birth (WILB) is a reported factor in whether women birthed in water or not – with a 10% increase for women who had a provider with more experience and confidence in facilitating water immersion and birth, compared to those who did not.<sup>3</sup>

### EDUCATION PACKAGE

The Clinical Skills Development Service, Metro North Health, in consultation with hospital executives, consumers, educators and practising clinicians, has developed an evidence-based, e-learning package to support maternity clinicians in the facilitation of WILB and to standardise and improve the accessibility of education on water immersion and birth.

### PROPOSED RESEARCH

This research will evaluate the impact of the e-learning and face-to-face education package for maternity clinicians in caring for women using warm water immersion for labour and birth (WILB) and has three phases.

**Phase One:** collate and synthesise local workplace procedures which provide guidance at hospitals within Queensland on WILB use through a 'Desktop' review.

**Phase Two:** investigate knowledge, attitudes, barriers and social norms of maternity health professional staff comparatively before and after participating in the e-learning and/or practical face-to-face waterbirth program.

**Phase Three:** measure rates of water immersion water births and clinical outcomes for women using water immersion water births compared to rates prior to the implementation of the e-learning and face-to-face education package across Queensland.

### ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

It is anticipated the findings will be used to target future behaviour change and ultimately improve the provision of women-centred care, birthing options and outcomes.

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