



Erica Williams at Princess Alexandra Hospital's back assessment clinic.

## ERICA MAKES A FRENCH CONNECTION

Having involved herself in the push for advanced scope physiotherapy in Australia, **Erica Williams** is no stranger to exploring new frontiers. Now she is advocating for direct access to physiotherapy in France while simultaneously sharing her skills with Gallic physiotherapists. Melissa Mitchell reports.

'What better way to improve your French than work as a locum in France?' mused Specialist Musculoskeletal Physiotherapist (as awarded by the Australian College of Physiotherapists in 2008) Dr Erica Williams FACP. With her 'passable' French, Erica reached out through her contacts and was put in touch with Jonathan Stammers, the French representative to the International Federation of Orthopaedic Manipulative Physical Therapists (IFOMPT). She spoke to Jonathan over the phone and was brimming with enthusiasm when they met for lunch in Paris to discuss her ideas.

'We had this long discussion about physiotherapy in Australia and in France and what they are trying to achieve. They'd recently been allowed a very limited trial of direct access (primary practice) but they're trying to get the full primary practitioner status that we have in Australia,' Erica says. 'I thought, there's no way I want to do locum work like that. So Jonathan suggested I do some teaching in France. When I got back to Australia, he asked me to do a webinar about the pathways to higher education here.'

Alongside Specialist Musculoskeletal Physiotherapist (as awarded by the Australian College of Physiotherapists in 2013) Dr Rod McLean FACP—Australia's IFOMPT delegate—Erica presented the live webinar

in July last year, expecting it to be shown to a small number of French physiotherapists. 'Then I found out that it was available to the whole of the French physio association,' Erica says. Spurred on to further engage with French physiotherapists, Erica continued communication via Jonathan and was invited to visit three physiotherapy schools in France as a guest lecturer, which she did in January.

French physiotherapy education is conducted at some universities but more often at private physiotherapy schools. Erica says the institutions want their students to learn medical English and stipulate a set number of hours that students must spend attending lectures in English. 'I start lectures in French and I do about a third in French, then theoretically I change to English. However, the first one I did was on radiology and part way into the lecture I said, "Okay, now I'm going to change to English." I started and I looked at their faces and thought, "They've got no idea what I'm talking about." So I delivered the entire lecture in French. It turns out they had stratified the students according to their English level and this group had the lowest level of English ability.

'Generally I do a mixture of French and English and when they don't understand the English, I explain in French. If they ask questions in

French, that's fine; I start in French and they get used to my weird accent and then we change over and do some in English and some in French and that works well.'

The ability to switch gears comes naturally to Erica, who practises in both the public and private healthcare domains. At the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, Queensland, she holds the advanced practice position of specialist physiotherapist in the Back Assessment Clinic. Erica was one of the original physiotherapists in this position and was involved in establishing it within the hospital's Spinal Surgical Service, setting a benchmark for excellence in patient management in Queensland. She also works in private practice at XPhysiotherapy in Toowong, a riverside suburb of Brisbane.

### Where it all started

Erica completed her physiotherapy studies at the University of Adelaide in 1978, followed by postgraduate studies at Curtin University, the University of Queensland (Master of Physiotherapy Studies (Musculoskeletal) in 1997), the University of Melbourne (Radiology for Physiotherapists in 2011 and Pharmacology for Health Professionals in 2013) and the University of Queensland again in 2018 (Graduate Certificate in Commerce). She also has a background in research, having worked as a research assistant and as a treating physiotherapist on various research projects.

First contact primary healthcare access to physiotherapists in Australia came into play before Erica began working as a physiotherapist. 'I was too young to be very involved when Australia got direct access [in 1976].' However, she was at the front line of working to introduce advanced physiotherapy practice to Australia and she understands the difficulty in overcoming barriers. 'They are similar to the barriers French physiotherapists are now facing in their push for direct access,' she says.

'What the French have at the moment is a trial. There are almost 100 départements in France and the trial is in six départements only. The right to hold this five-year trial was passed in Parliament in May last year after a couple of years of debate,' Erica says. 'They had GPs marching on Parliament to protest against direct access and the invasion of the GPs' patch. The trial is actually very limited; physios in the trial have to have a direct relationship with a GP and upload their notes for the GP to check. They are allowed eight treatments without a "medical diagnosis" made by the GP.'

While the trial is underway in France, Erica is volunteering her advocacy and clinical skills by educating undergraduate students in an attempt to prepare them for primary practitioner status. In addition to improved clinical reasoning and diagnostic skills, she hopes to provide them with clinical knowledge about radiology. Erica was invited to be a member of the scientific committee (with a clinical perspective) of the French equivalent of the APA Musculoskeletal group, the Organisation for Musculoskeletal Therapy—France, in its bid to host the 2028 IFOMPT conference in Bordeaux. Canada had also expressed interest. In July Erica was in Basel, Switzerland, for the IFOMPT 50th anniversary conference, where Vancouver was announced as the host of the 2028 conference.

Since taking up her guest lecturing post, Erica—soon to return to France to resume teaching—has been pleasantly surprised by the

knowledge base of the French undergraduates. She has provided feedback on that in light of the growing interest in expanding education pathways in France so that they are similar to those offered in Australia and Canada.

'In France they use some courses from Canada to bring their career pathways to a higher level. But the French don't have postgraduate master's programs or similar courses. It's more of an experiential pathway that is slightly more formal than our version,' Erica says. 'They are trying to establish pathways towards more formal postgraduate education and a framework for recognition of more specialised levels of practice.'

### Giving back

Erica's passion for educating the next generation of physiotherapists has its roots in the excellent guidance and mentoring she received while studying and working in private practice and in the public health system alongside some of Australia's leading physiotherapists.

'I started learning the Maitland concept with Pat Trott, Ruth Grant and a whole lot of people in South Australia during my undergraduate years. Early in my career, I worked with Mary Magarey and then David Butler—I learnt so much from him even though, at that time, we were "stretching nerves". Through Curtin University, I was in contact with pain gurus Bob Elvey and Max Zusman.

'Then I came up here [to Queensland] and there was Gwen Jull, Lorimer Moseley, Paul Hodges and Bill Vicenzino. They were all in the department at the time that I was undertaking my master's degree. The list goes on and on; they have just been such good mentors. Having that mentoring at an early stage made a big difference for me. I think it's no wonder that people drop out of the profession if they go on to private practice immediately after base training and miss out on ongoing mentoring and inspiration.'

At Gwen's insistence, Erica began postgraduate teaching in Australia after completing her master's degree. She worked with Gwen at the latter's private practice clinic at the time. Erica favours teaching postgraduate students over undergraduate but has done both. She also helps mentor registrar friends going through the specialisation training program at the Australian College of Physiotherapists. Erica believes the profession needs more specialists and continues to promote specialisation to the broader physiotherapy community, whether in Australia or overseas.

'Specialisation is very different from advanced scope practice. Specialisation focuses on high levels of clinical reasoning in management. It's about good clinical diagnoses and using clinical reasoning to establish those diagnoses as well as ongoing management at that much higher level,' Erica says.

'In my experience, the role of a specialist physiotherapist is not yet fully understood or valued by GPs, the wider medical community or insurers or, at times, within our own profession. I'd love to see more early-career physiotherapists take up the various options for career progression that are now available to them. Certainly, the titling and specialisation pathway leads to enormous job satisfaction and numerous unexpected opportunities.'