



# NSW Speech Pathology Evidence Based Practice Interest Group

## Critically Appraised Topic (CAT)

**CLINICAL BOTTOM LINE:** The Free Water Protocol was shown to have no adverse outcomes, and positive results, in four studies involving medically stable patients in rehabilitation and residential aged care facilities. Due to methodological limitations of the study involving acute patients, there is insufficient evidence to support the use of the Free Water Protocol in acute settings.

**Background and Objectives:** The practicing Speech Pathology members of the Adult Swallowing EBP group wished to explore the use of the Frazier Free Water Protocol with adult patients with dysphagia with in the aim of improving quality of life and fluid intake, whilst minimising pulmonary complications. This followed on from the Oral Hygiene Critically Appraised Topic (2009).

**Clinical Question [patient/problem, intervention, (comparison), outcome]:** In patients with dysphagia, what are the benefits and complications of implementing the Free Water Protocol?

**Search Terms/Systems:** Dysphagia, free water protocol, aspiration pneumonia....  
Systems: Speechbite, Google Scholar, CIAP, Medline, Cinahl, Psych Info, Embase, Science Direct.

**Selection Criteria:** Adult populations, dysphagia, aspiration, use of thickened fluids, aspiration pneumonia.

### Results:

The reviewed studies achieved Level II, III or Level IV levels of evidence (NH&MRC).

The studies involving medically stable patients in rehabilitation settings or residential aged care facilities found nil adverse events following the use of the free water protocol, when strict oral hygiene practices and Speech Pathologist led safe swallowing recommendations were applied (e.g. Carlaw et al 2011).

Patients who were acutely unwell and who had severe or degenerative neurological disease and/or respiratory disease, as well as poor mobility, were more likely to develop pulmonary complications from the Free Water Protocol than those who were medically stable with the same conditions (Karagiannis et al, 2011). Note, patients with these conditions were also excluded from one study (Garon 1997).

Further research regarding a possible reduction in length of stay due to the use of the free water protocol may be beneficial, as this was a trend shown in Garon (1997), although not statistically significant.

**Appraised By:** Adult Swallowing EBP Group  
**Clinical Group:** Adult Swallowing EBP Group

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