

The columnist

Annalee Newitz on the corporate side of social media **p26**

Aperture

Photos and artwork capture the spirit of the ocean **p28**

Letters

Will accessible HRT ever be more than a pipe dream? **p30**

Culture

An account of the rise of YouTube explores its wider impact **p32**

Culture

Big History takes the wheel in a new guide to the future **p34**

Comment

Come on in, the water's cold

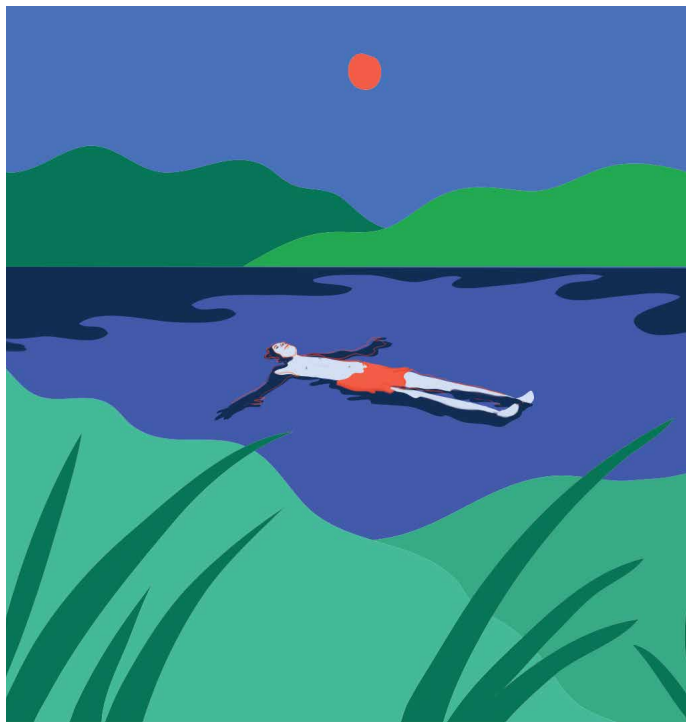
Outdoor swimming helps reduce inflammation, the cause of many health issues. It should be a public health measure, says **Mark Harper**

THE popularity of outdoor swimming has been growing at such a rate, I am starting to worry I will run out of cold-water-naïve participants for my studies on its health benefits. Perhaps there won't be a need to carry out further studies because everyone will be doing it anyway. But, in the meantime, there is good reason to consider why the provision of outdoor swimming should be a public health measure.

There is a strong physiological basis underpinning the many positive health effects of outdoor swimming. These benefits largely come from a reduction in excess inflammation through repeated immersion in cold water. The cold water affects inflammation in two ways: first, baseline and peak levels of inflammation are both lowered by the repeated exposure; second, putting your face in cold water directly stimulates the vagus nerve, and thereby the parasympathetic nervous system, which results in a further, short-term reduction in levels of inflammation.

Many of Western society's health challenges are linked to abnormally high levels of inflammation, including heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, arthritis, fibromyalgia and chronic pain. What's more, a significant proportion of cases of depression are associated with inflammation. A simple intervention that reduces inflammation could, therefore, be an effective public health measure.

The potential of cold-water



MICHELLE URBANO

bathing is supported by the results of our survey of 722 people "self-medicating" with the activity. As we had hypothesised, most people with inflammatory conditions found it helped their symptoms. Given the inflammatory aspect of both covid-19 and long covid, there is good reason to think that cold water could also help with these healthcare issues.

Most respondents were using cold-water bathing for their mental health. So, we enrolled 59 people with anxiety and depression into an eight-week sea-swimming course. Not only

did we see an improvement in their symptoms during the course, but more than 80 per cent were still engaging in the activity and finding benefit from it three months later. Self-sustaining interventions, as this seems to be, are ideal public health measures.

Even if you don't have access to open water, one study showed that office workers who had cold showers took fewer sick days than colleagues who didn't.

The UK is particularly amenable to the widespread adoption of outdoor swimming because the water temperature needed to feel

positive health effects is under 20°C – generally, the maximum found in our outdoor waters.

The main issue is safe access. With sewage alerts for English and Welsh beaches this summer, water quality needs to be addressed urgently. Then, legislation could be used to open up access and absolve land owners from liability. After that, organisations like the National Trust might be inclined to put in measures such as ladders and let people use their facilities.

People also need to become safe and confident swimmers through courses such as those run by Chill UK, which began with our clinical trial and is now rolling out around the country, or groups like Mental Health Swims. Swimmers also need to be aware of how to reduce their risk of cold water shock.

Happily, the potential benefits of cold-water swimming as a public health measure have been recognised by Fulton MacGregor, a member of Scottish parliament. As a result, we ran a roundtable at the Scottish parliament on 13 September. This will be followed by an in-person event in March 2023, bringing experts together to turn this into a reality.

In the meantime, the water is still relatively warm, so why not try an outdoor dip? Then you will be hooked when colder weather comes along. ■



Mark Harper is an anaesthetist, researcher and author of *Chill: The cold water swim cure*. @wildswimdoctor