

# Polio Australia’s Annual Health and Wellness Retreats Review: the implications for participants on Health Literacy and Health Outcomes

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## Background

Like most developed countries, Australia’s population is ageing, resulting in a rise in chronic diseases - which includes the Late Effects of Polio/Post-Polio Syndrome (LEoP/PPS). Managing this unprecedented demand on health services depends on people’s ability to access and utilise information appropriately, therefore the need to improve health literacy is paramount.

Polio Australia’s annual Late Effects of Polio Residential Self-Management Program model - also known as “Health and Wellness Retreat” - was adapted from Polio Health International’s Post-Polio Wellness Retreat held in Warm Springs, USA in 2009. The aim of these Retreats is to provide up to 70 polio survivors, including their partners/carers, with a holistic approach to managing the late effects of polio and finding life balance. Each day focusses on a different aspect of health and wellness: Body, Mind and Spirit.

For each of the four days of the Retreats, several local health and other practitioners were sourced and invited to facilitate sessions. Most required additional information on the LEoP/PPS prior to their presentation. However, all were well acquainted with the issues by the completion of their sessions, thanks to their exposure to so many polio survivors in one place. This ‘crash course’ in the LEoP/PPS now provides those practitioners with more effective strategies to assist any other polio patients/clients they may see in future.

The Retreats have become a flagship program for Polio Australia, supporting its vision of ensuring that all polio survivors have access to adequate support and information together with comprehensive, consistent health care from a range of well-informed and educated professionals.

## Project Overview

In a Review of the four Retreats run by Polio Australia in New South Wales (2010), Victoria (2011), Queensland (2012), and South Australia (2013), all participants were sent a 10 question survey inviting them to self-report on whether the experience has resulted in any improvements in their Health Literacy and Health Outcomes.

Surveys were posted or emailed to 180 participants - 57 were returned (32%). The raw data was recorded and additional comments noted.

## Health Literacy as an Asset

Polio Australia’s Review used survey questions based on Professor Don Nutbeam’s<sup>1</sup> conceptual model of ‘health literacy as an asset’ to determine if participants believed themselves to have improved Health Literacy and improved Health Outcomes as a result of attending the Late Effects of Polio Residential Self-Management Program/Health and Wellness Retreats.

According to Nutbeam’s model, in addition to changed health behaviours and practices, improved health literacy can be an enabler for advocacy and broader social engagement. This is a vital skill for Australia’s post-polio community to develop, as there is currently no government funding provided for awareness raising or up-skilling health practitioners in the management of this chronic condition. Therefore, the capacity to effectively self-advocate is paramount in lobbying both government and the health sector for recognition and change.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Don Nutbeam PhD FFPH, Vice Chancellor, University of Southampton

## Survey Response Demographics

### Gender



73% Female  
27% Male

### Birth Years



1920s = 3.5%  
1930s = 21%  
1940s = 46%  
1950s = 26%  
1960s = 3.5%

### How Many Retreats



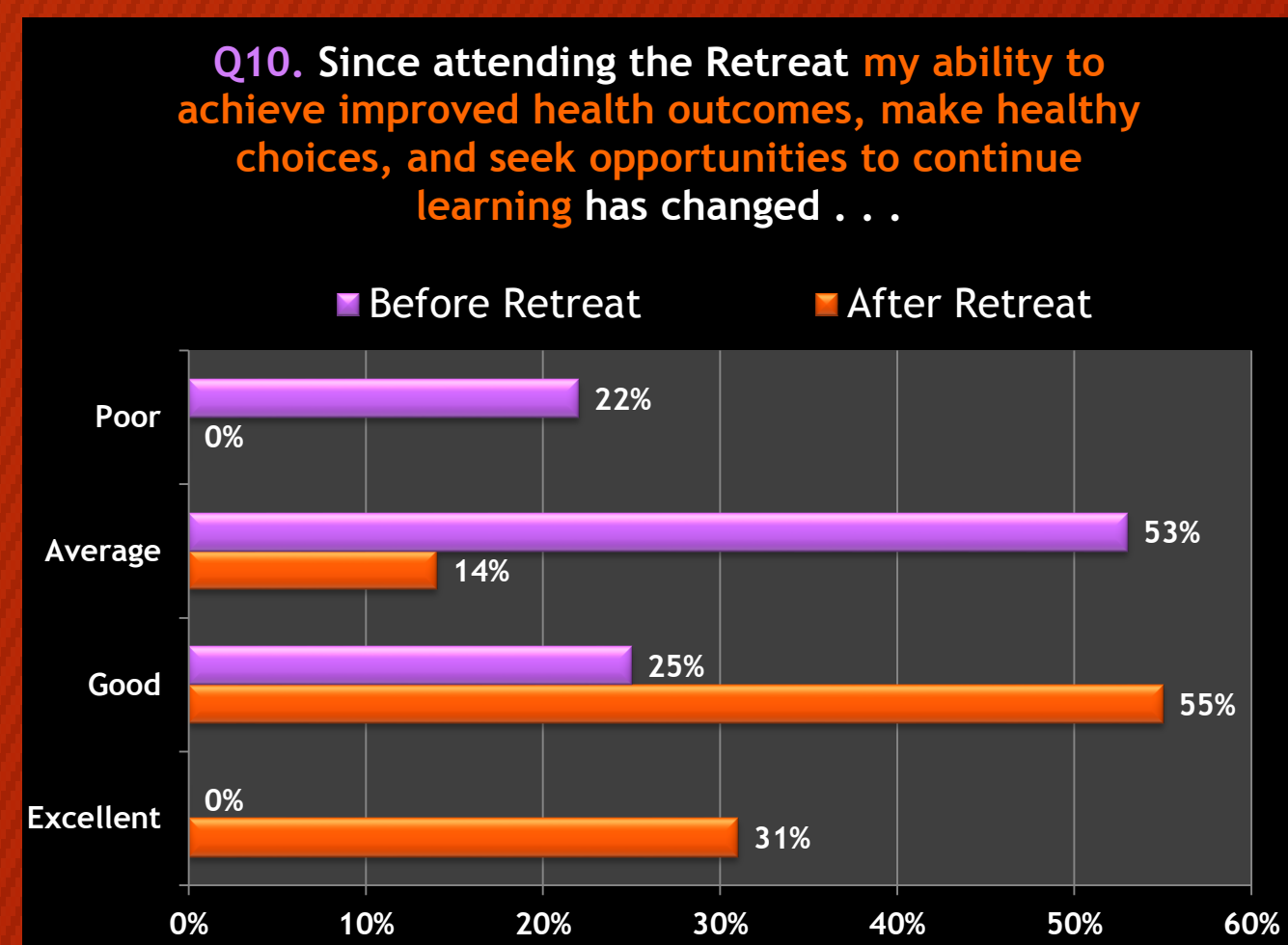
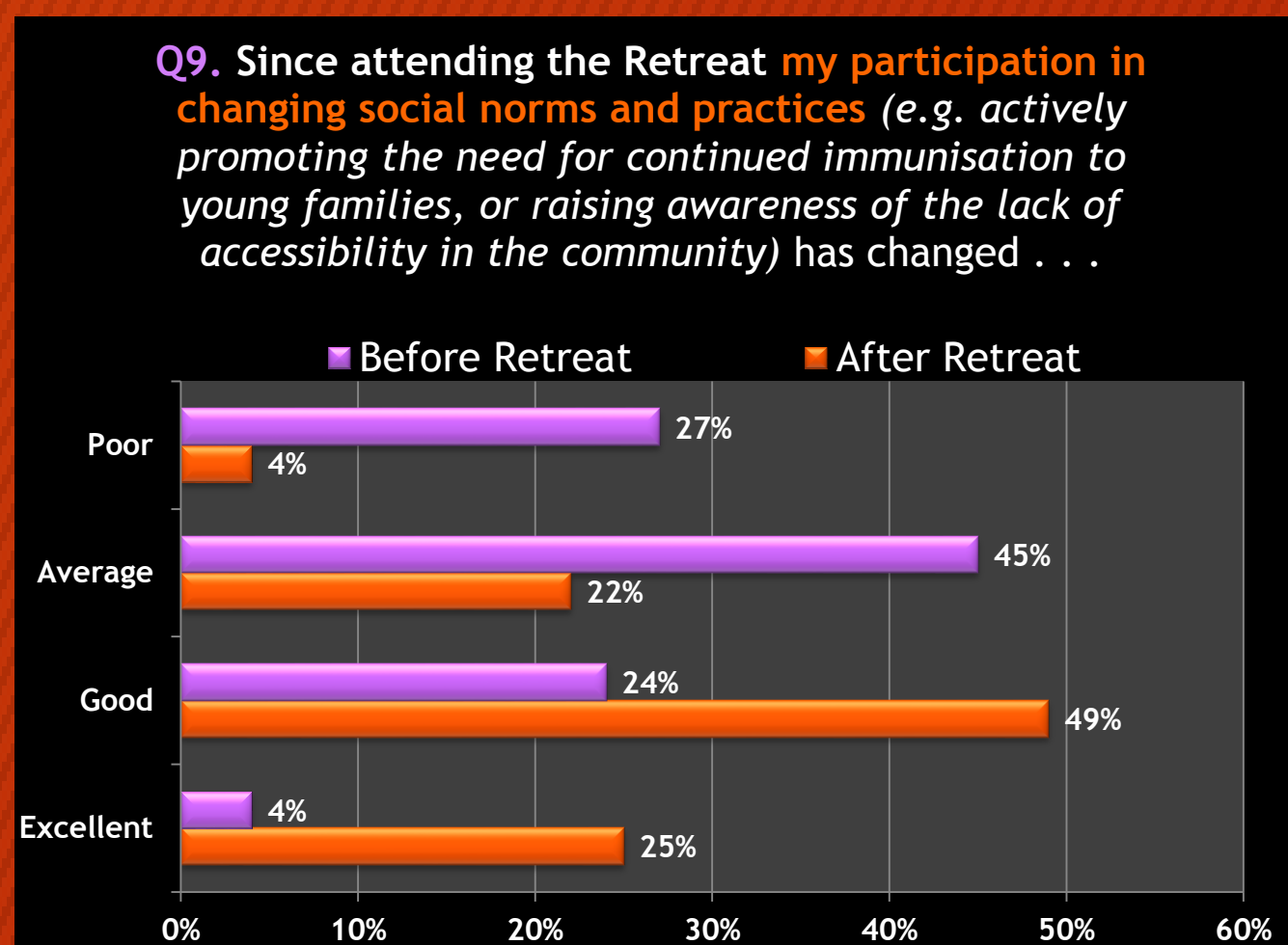
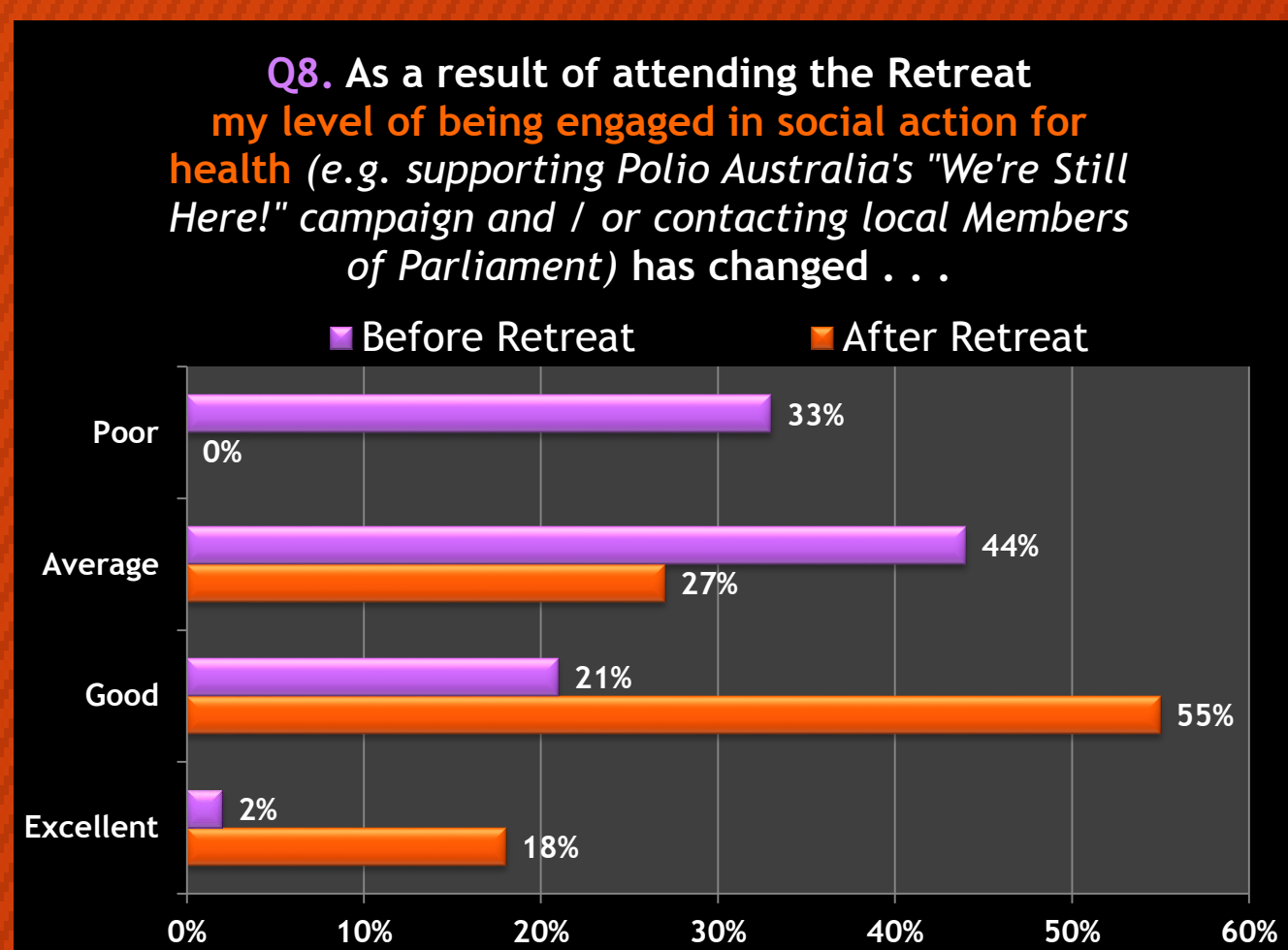
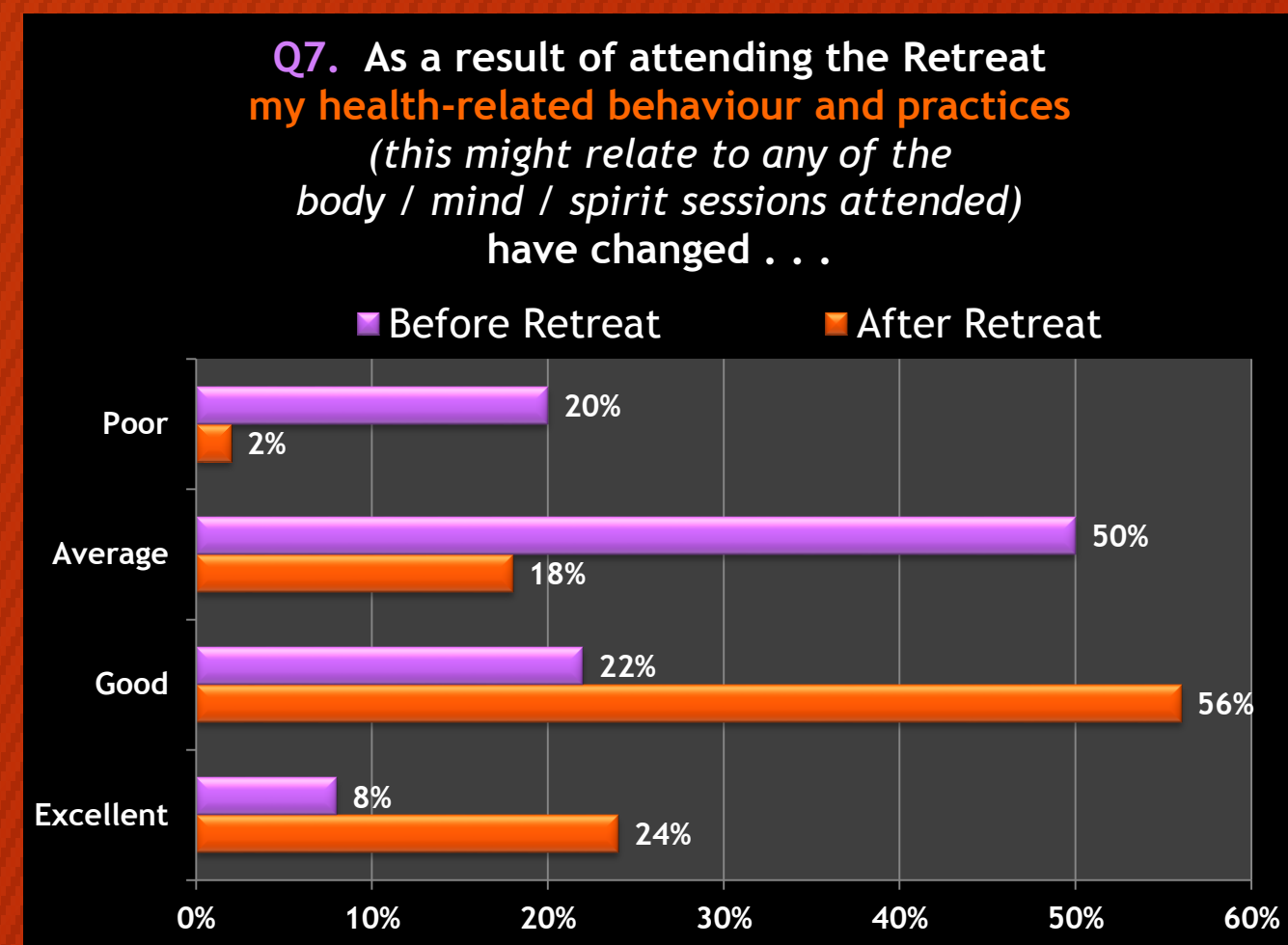
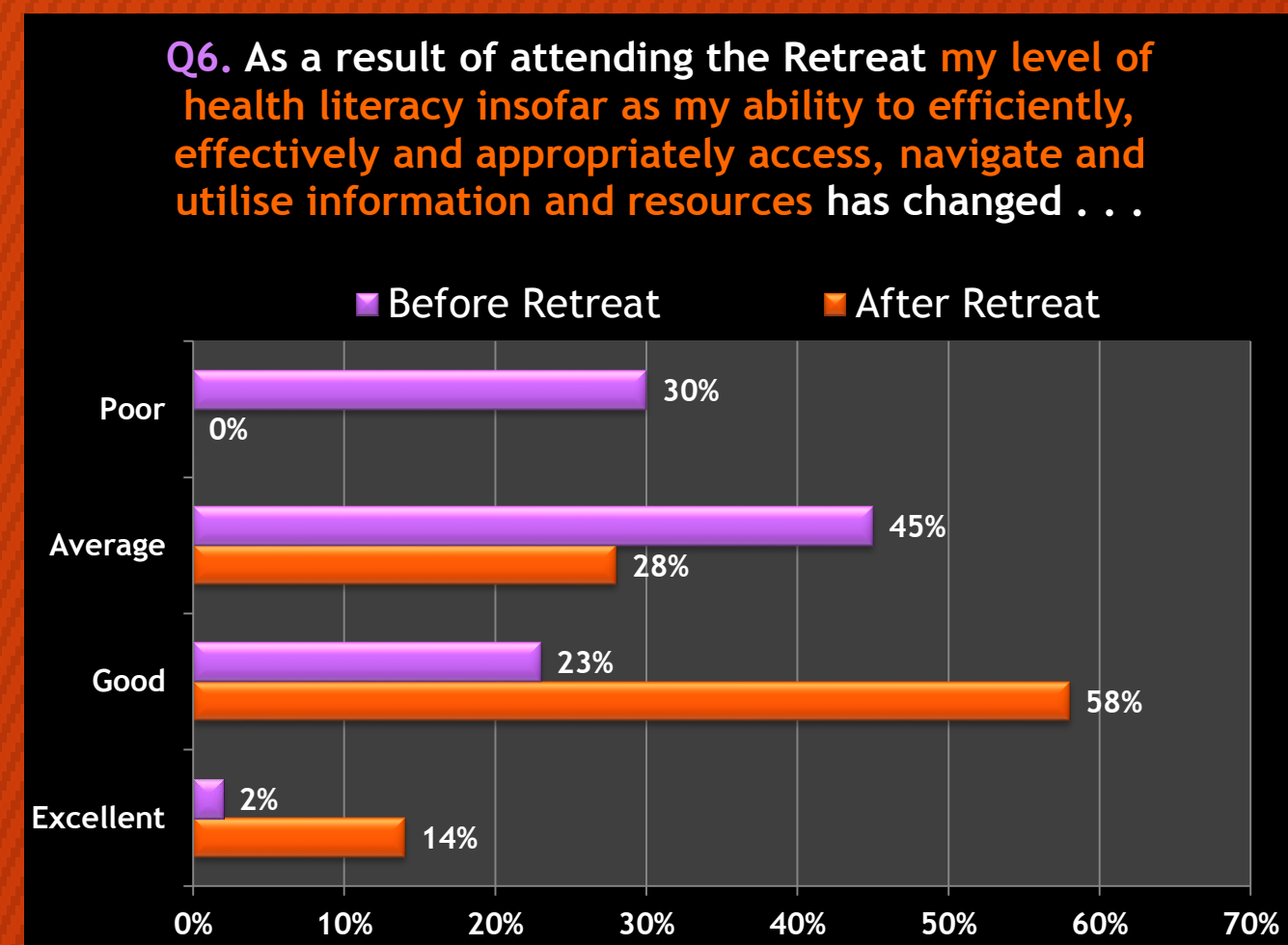
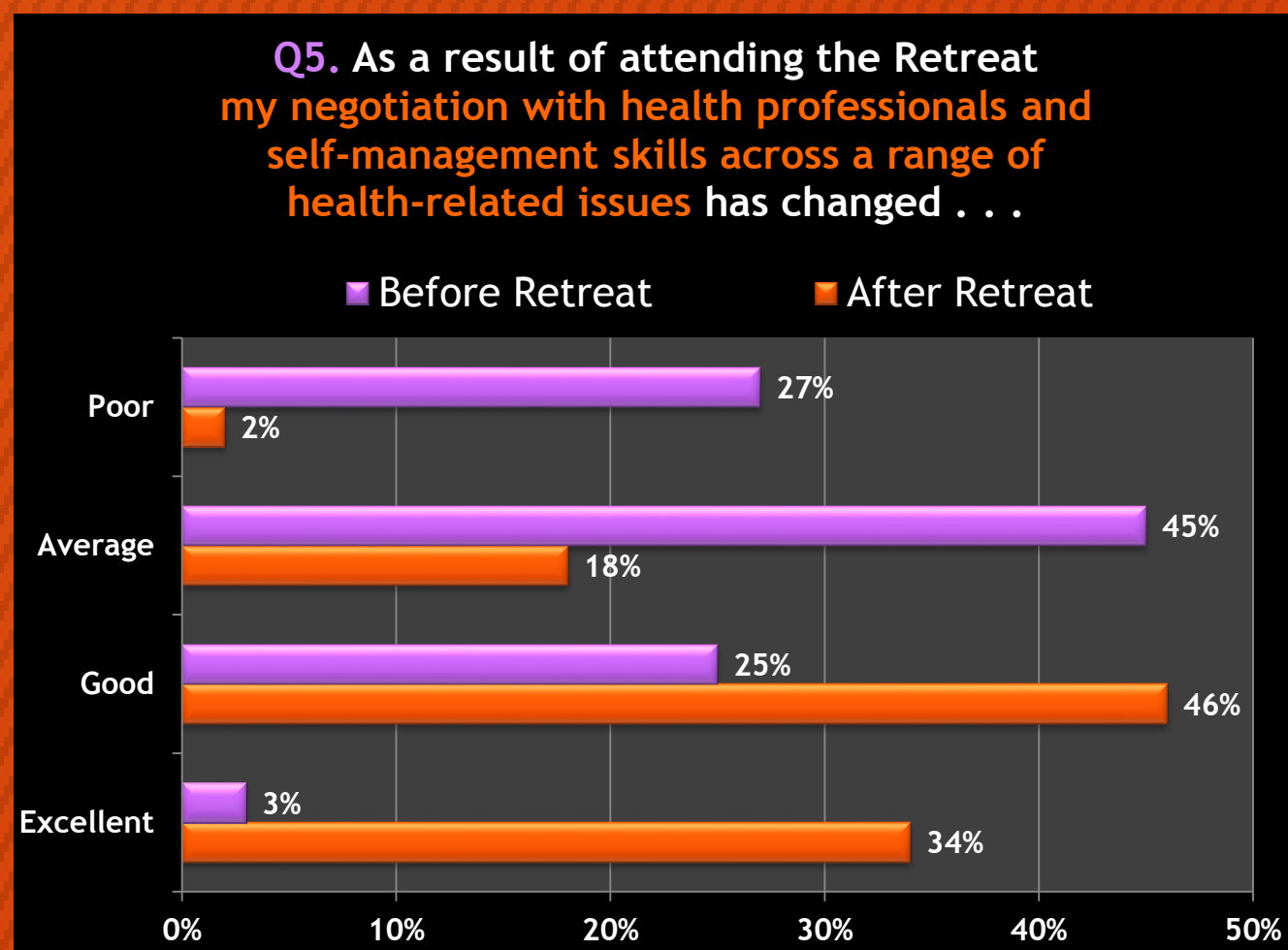
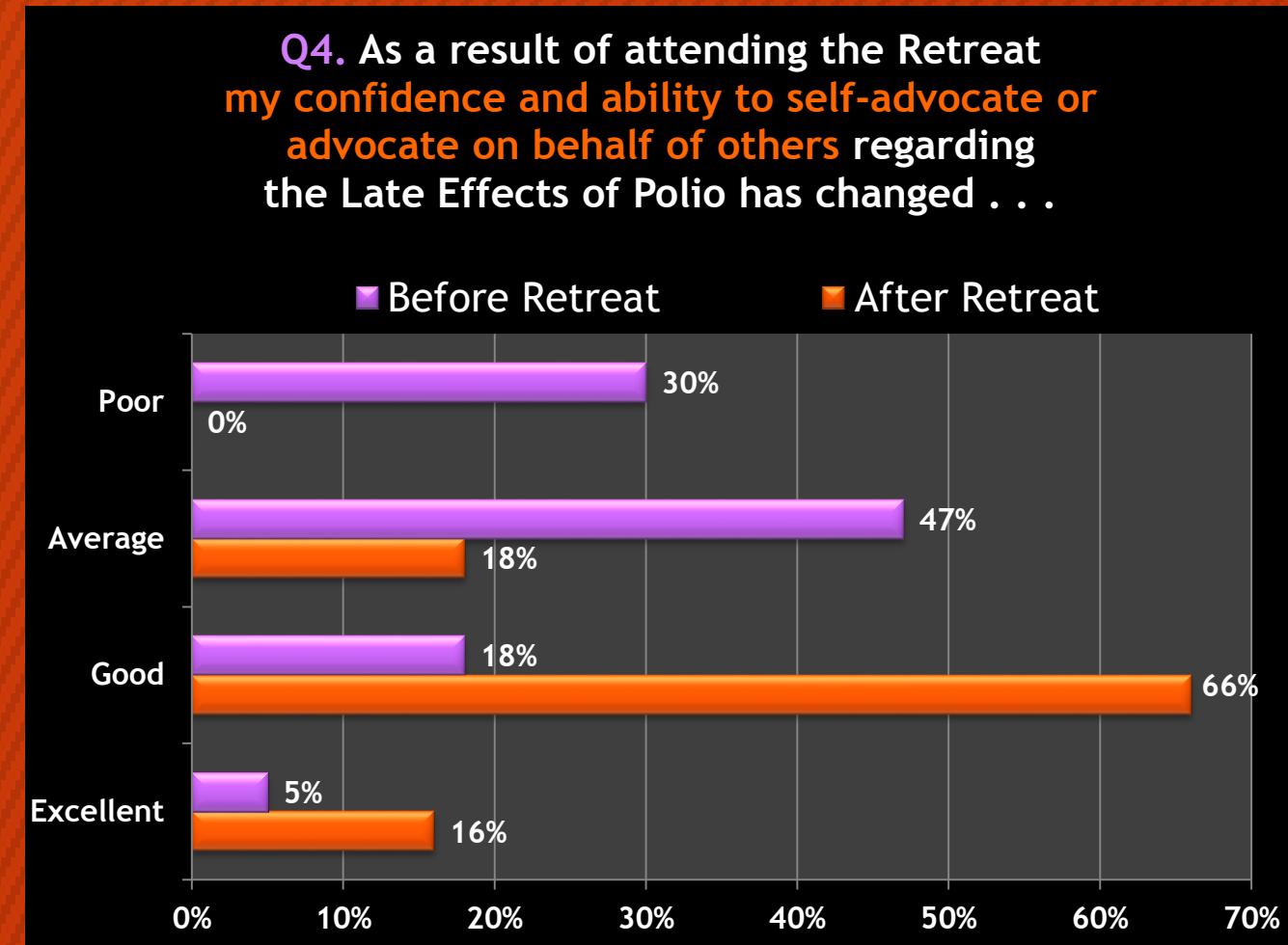
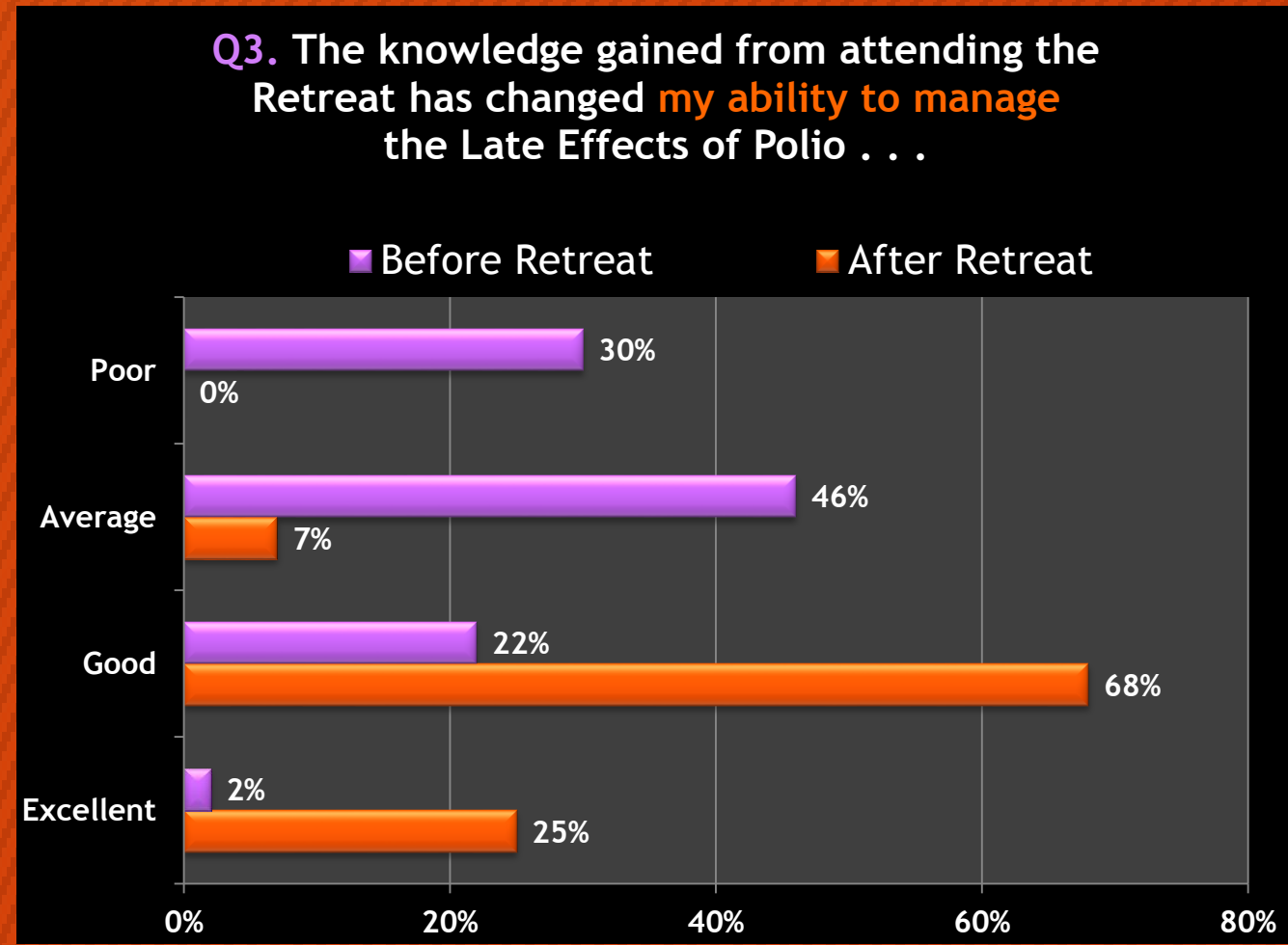
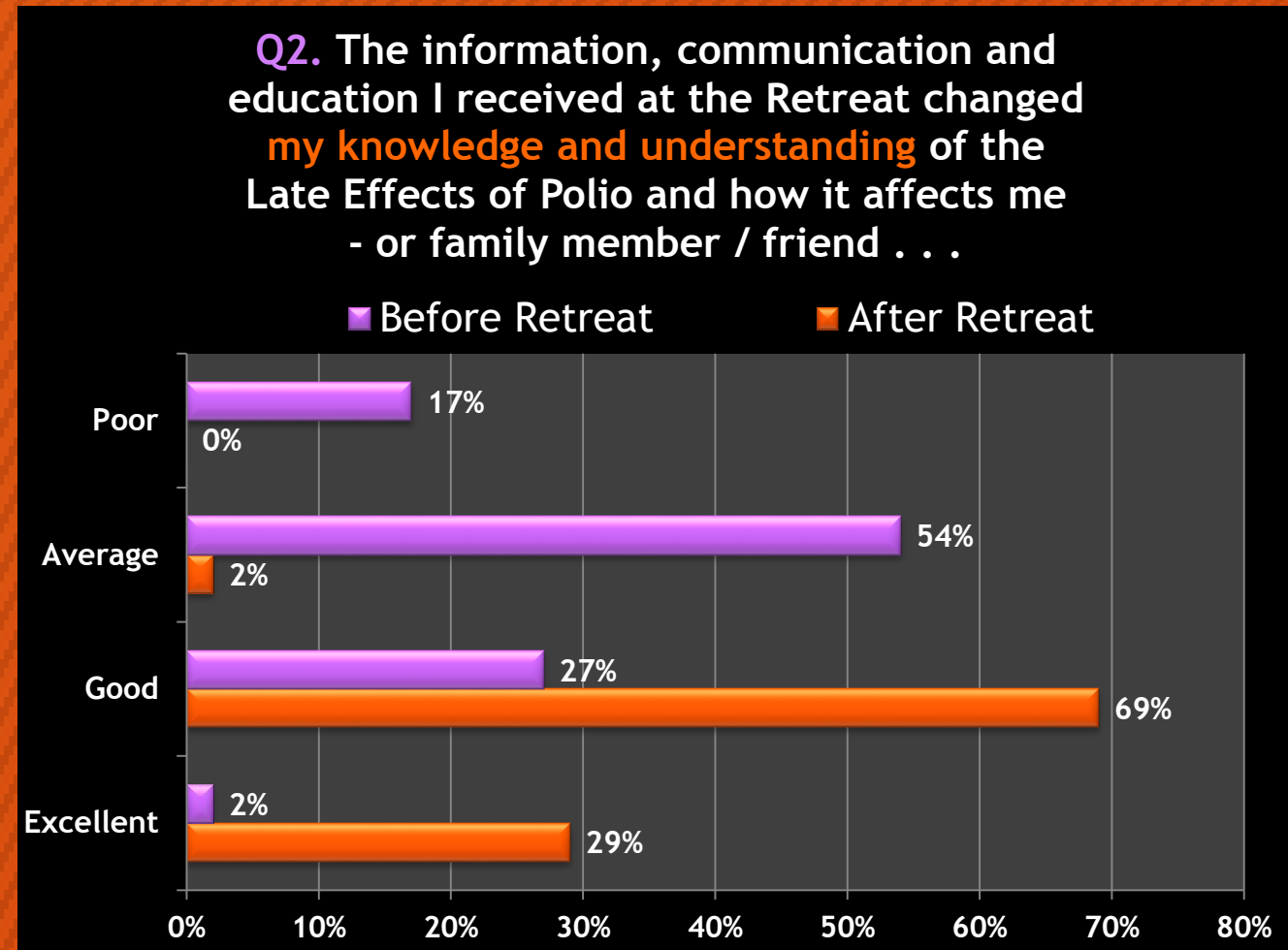
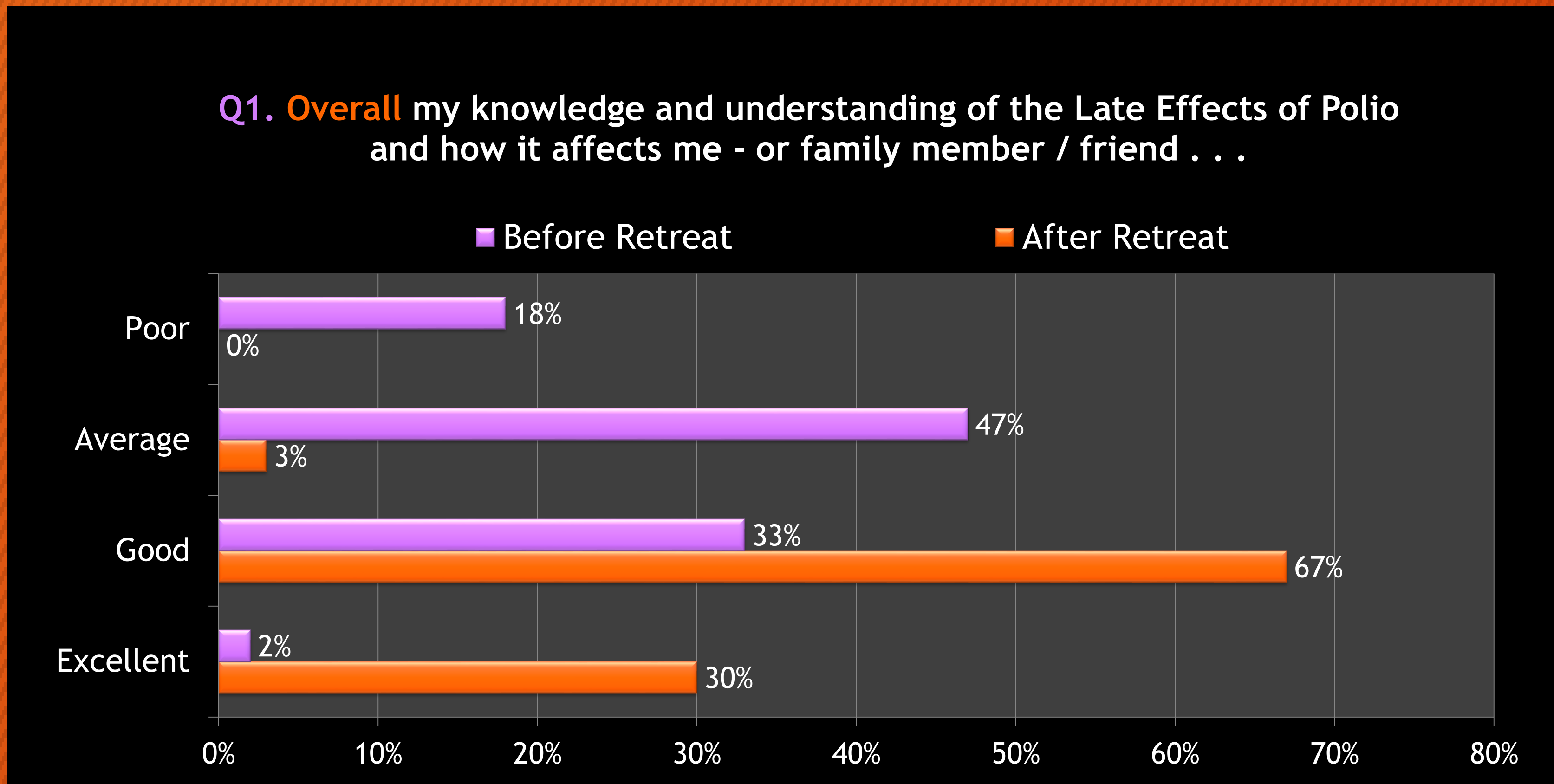
70% = 1 Retreat  
30% = 1+ Retreats

### Where Living



27% = New South Wales  
22% = Victoria  
22% = Queensland  
16% = South Australia  
9% = Tasmania  
4% = Western Australia

## Responses



2012 Queensland Health and Wellness Retreat

## Conclusion

“The ability to access and use health information is a fundamental skill which allows people to make informed decisions and helps them to maintain their basic health. On a broader level, adequate levels of health literacy may help to reduce some of the costs in the health system, prevent illness and chronic disease, and reduce the rates of accident and death.” <sup>2</sup>

The overwhelmingly positive trend towards improved Health Literacy and improved Health Outcomes, as reflected in this Review, confirms that Polio Australia’s annual Late Effects of Polio Residential Self-Management Program/Health and Wellness Retreat is not only an effective chronic disease self-management Program but is also assisting people to be better self-advocates, and may even prevent or reduce admission to acute care.

Additionally, the Review provides essential statistical data for use in reports, funding submissions, government lobbying, health related publications, and encouraging further research.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Council on Learning 2008, *Health literacy in Canada, A healthy understanding 2008*, Ottawa



“I have a good understanding of the LEoP and how it affects me, and a reasonable grasp of the associated issues. However attending the Retreat, and its 4 day concentration of current information, plus exchanging views with many other polio survivors has expanded my knowledge and understanding of my LEoP/PPS and the different ways issues can be coped with by myself and other polio survivors, all of whom are uniquely impacted on.”

“I tended to avoid going to specialists, physiotherapists and others owing to bad experiences as a child. But having met many of them at the Retreats, I am now able to approach them more readily. I have since had two assessments at Polio Services Victoria and advocate same for other polio survivors I encounter at meetings and in the community.”



“I do aqua aerobics three days a week. Sometimes I just couldn’t be bothered but I now know I MUST be bothered! I know I need to make healthy choices like eat the right food, don’t put on weight, do exercise, etc. I want to know more and I want others to know more. Going to the Retreat was one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. I wish I could go to more of them. Meeting so many others who, even though our conditions varied greatly - from people in wheelchairs, to others like me with no visible signs of having had polio - I knew everyone there knew how I was feeling. I enjoyed almost every session, but being able to chat with the others was so rewarding. It had a profound effect on my life. It was also such an emotional event for me too, learning that others had been shunned as children. Very emotional, but so good to be able to speak about it and know they understood.”