

Wheelchair Selection: The Role of the Rehab Equipment Specialist

Rehabilitation technology has expanded substantially over the past five to ten years. Two of the more popular technologies—wheelchair mobility and seating—have seen dramatic changes in terms of functionality, availability, and cost. Many medical equipment companies buy and distribute these state-of-the-art wheelchairs and other durable medical equipment. However, it is important to understand that the people working at these companies may have only cursory knowledge in the proper evaluation of a rehab client.

With most spinal cord-injured clients, it may be beneficial to consult with a rehab equipment specialist. Rehabilitation technologies such as mobility and seating include more than just products. Providing clients with optimal mobility and seating systems is a very specialized area and requires considerably more knowledge, adaptive skills, and support services than providing clients with common, everyday wheelchairs or simple seat cushions. Ensuring that your client has the right equipment at the right time can result in significant benefits in the long run. At the WCRA, we strongly believe in a team approach, where the medical supply company, the rehab equipment specialist, and the physical or occupational therapist work together to deliver the most appropriate mobility and seating product. This team approach should occur both during the initial evaluation process when the client is receiving his/her first wheelchair and also as part of a reevaluation process when a new chair is recommended.

The average replacement schedule for a wheelchair is five to six years; for a cushion, two to five years. Therefore, a wheelchair-bound client will require at least one, if not multiple, replacements. Although the predominant factor in choosing the correct wheelchair and seating will be the client's diagnosis and overall medical assessment, other important factors such as age, skin integrity issues, mobility needs, environment, and lifestyle must also be considered. Mobility and seating choices should not be based strictly on medical necessity. A rehabilitation equipment specialist, a therapist, or a physician must be able to justify these choices in relationship to the specific needs of the client.

In order to ensure that the appropriate mobility and seating products are obtained, we suggest the following:

- Obtain an evaluation by a seating and positioning specialist or clinic (physical therapy subspecialty). Programs that we suggest in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are:
 - ◇ Sister Kenny Rehabilitation Institute Seating Clinic.
 - ◇ Courage Center.
 - ◇ Gillette Lifetime Specialty Healthcare (for customized seating systems).

During the seating clinic evaluation, seat mapping should be completed to assist in determining the most appropriate cushion for pressure relief. In most cases, a referral from a physician is needed before your client can be seen.

- Identify a medical supply company that employs either certified Assistive Technology Practitioners (ATP) or Certified Rehabilitation Technology Suppliers (CRTS®). These rehab equipment specialists have knowledge, training, experience, and skills to match the consumers' needs to the appropriate equipment. Here are a few suggestions to help you locate a certified rehabilitation technology supplier.
 - ◇ Utilize the National Registry of Rehabilitation Technology Suppliers website (NRRTS) at www.nrrts.org to find NRRTS registrants.
 - ◇ Go to the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America's website (RESNA) at www.resna.org and link to their directory of credentialed ATPs.
 - ◇ Contact a nearby rehabilitation center and ask to speak to one of their seating and mobility clinicians.

After the chair is received, to get the most mileage from the chair:

- ◇ Know the warranty and be sure to know what it includes.
- ◇ Provide regular maintenance to prevent major breakdowns.
- ◇ Have a physical therapist reevaluate the chair and seating annually or when the client experiences changes in medical condition.

Questions to Consider:

- ◇ Can the client functionally propel a manual wheelchair?
- ◇ Will the use of a lighter-weight frame benefit overall mobility?
- ◇ Before advancing to a motorized chair, will the use of the manual wheelchair provide the client with his or her most probable means toward daily exercise, continued range of motion, and easier accessibility throughout the home, workplace, and via transportation?
- ◇ Will the client require customized programming or the use of specialized switches that necessitate a motorized wheelchair with higher-end electronic capabilities?
- ◇ Would the need for power-actuated positioning systems such as power recline, power tilt in space, or a standing frame be substantiated? Or would these functions be generally unused by the client and perhaps just make the chair overly heavy and cumbersome (not to mention far more expensive)?

For many with permanent disabilities, the lifetime use of rehabilitation medical equipment such as a custom wheelchair may be the one aspect that allows the client to participate in the able-bodied world. As technology improves, providing lighter materials and more functionality, the job of a rehabilitation equipment specialist will become more important.

References:

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