

Experience of power mobility aid use from an environmental aspect: the perspective of Maltese older adults

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Summary

International research suggest that Power Mobility Aids (PMAs) potentially increase Older Persons' ability to be independent whilst facilitating inclusion and community participation through promoting community mobility. Study explored the experiences of community living Older Persons utilising a PMA.

Aims and objectives

Study explored the experiences of Older Persons who live in the community and utilise PMAs. Through the following objectives, the project focused on Older Persons' experiences when using the device:

1. Identifying the role of PMAs in the Older Person's engagement in the community.
2. Exploring environmental factors related to PMA use.
3. Looking at the safe use of PMAs.
4. Identifying the impact of PMAs on the Older Person's well-being and Quality of Life.

Background

Older Persons making use of PMAs are on the increase, possibly due to their desire to lead more independent lives. Given this upward trend in PMA use, research suggested that it is crucial to understand the role that PMAs can play in Older Persons' lives. Therefore, determining the experience of Older Persons using PMAs provides insight into how best to utilise Assistive Technology to prevent dependence, while promoting improved Quality of Life for the older persons.

Prior to embarking on this study, permissions were sought from the Assistant Director of the Active Ageing and Community Care Department (AACCD) within the Maltese Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity. Ethical clearance was additionally obtained from the Faculty for Social Wellbeing's Research and Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta.

Study adopted a qualitative approach. An experiential qualitative research approach from a constructionist perspective was considered the appropriate method to reach the study's objectives. This enabled the researcher to (1) conduct an in-depth exploration of the Older Persons' perspectives on the day-to-day use of PMAs in their lives, (2) investigate how Older Persons' lives were shaped by the use of PMAs, and (3) analyse how PMA use was affected by the environment's safety, and physical and social factors.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The researcher's years of experience as an occupational therapist, together with the lack of local literature on PMA use and experiences of Older Persons thereof, helped to devise the tool. Local and international data accentuated salient markers that necessitated inclusion in the instrument tool. Instrument was conducted with 7 Older Persons making use of a PMA, specifically powered wheelchairs or scooters. Participants were over 60 years, both males and females and made use of the PMA within the community. All participants were living in Malta.

Data was then thematically analysed, the researcher followed the process as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings revealed various themes which deserved discussion. Main emerging themes were,

- (i) the role of the PMA in social and community participation,
- (ii) linking Independence, Quality of life and Social Policy,
- (iii) well-being of the Older Person participant using the PMA,
- *(iv) experiencing the build and outdoor environment linked to the responsibility of authorities involved,
- *(v) the natural environment and frequency of PMA use
- (vi) experiencing the PMA within a community context linked to the process of PMA acquisition
- *(vii) social attitudes towards PMA use and users.

Each theme subdivides into further sub-themes.

Given the complexity of the study I am focussing the poster on the environmental aspect. It will be presenting the physical and social challenges which emerged from this study, whilst also introducing the safety implications linked to them. That is the: build and outdoor environment; natural environment; device challenges; social challenges. Thereby focusing on themes IV, V and VII, aforementioned.

Discussion

The Older Person participants presented the PMA as an instrument of social and community participation. Participants engaged regularly in leisure, religious, and productive activities related to community life using their PMAs. Participants highlighted the fact that using a PMA is not a necessity but rather a need towards remaining independent and active participants in the community. PMA use was linked to independence and aspects related to improved wellbeing and Quality of Life. Despite the reported benefits of PMA, results presented challenges which seemed to hinder the maximal positive impact of PMAs. Challenges revolved around (a) physical barriers related to the human made changes, (b) the natural environment, (c) the PMA and (d) to social barriers related to authorities in charge and the general public. Several implications related to the safe use of PMA within the community environment were also highlighted, (a) local legislation, (b) the role of local councils and policy makers in promoting the inclusion and safe use of PMAs, and (c) the process of PMA acquisition locally.

Indeed the findings of this study revealed the complexity of factors related to PMA use amongst Older Persons living in the community. Findings from this study provided a platform to further research on the inclusion and safe use of PMAs within the local community, as well as increasing awareness on the role of the Allied Health Practitioner in the provision, acquisition and use of PMA amongst Older Persons living in the community.

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