

## **The journey of a thousand miles...**

I was six months into my new role as a wheelchair therapist when I came across the opportunity for those new to wheelchair and seating services to apply for a bursary to attend the PMG 2015 conference. Encouraged by my clinical lead to apply, I was very pleased when I received the news that I had secured the funding, and looked forward to spending three days participating with and learning from clinicians and other professionals working in this specialist field.

Still feeling very much at the bottom of a steep learning curve in my new role, I felt unsure of where and how I should spend my time at the conference in order to gain the most, in terms of product and clinical knowledge, without experiencing information overload! However, although it was a very comprehensive programme, I found that the well-organised structure provided ample time to attend the presentations and network with others, as well as being able to meet the majority of exhibitors and try out their products. This was a particularly important aspect of the event for me as, although many of the companies were on my radar, there were others I had limited knowledge of and this was a good opportunity to compare their products all under one roof, and find out more about their brand and ethos.

Dave Calver was an excellent choice of speaker for the conference. I found both his plenary and gala evening speeches inspirational, and it was fascinating to hear his life's journey - from working in adventure sports to retraining as an OT following his life changing injury, and his subsequent role in international development work with United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Wheels for Humanity. Consequently following his prompting, I have been wading through the World Health Organisation wheelchair service training package, which is an excellent source of information for those new, or even not so new, to wheelchair services.

Overall, I found the presentations were a good balance of the highly technical and research focused with examples of innovation and good practice. I found the presentation by James and Rowell, 'The Unseatables', of particular interest, as an excellent example of what can be achieved by a multi-disciplinary team of highly skilled individuals thinking outside the box; it demonstrated too that NHS wheelchair services can and do provide individualised, compassionate, and client-centred care with equipment that is tailored to clients' needs.

I also found the presentation by Jane Fontein on 'improving function with manual wheelchairs' informative and relevant in terms of our service provision. As with other services, due to budget constraints, we have to make difficult decisions regarding which clients we can assess face to face, therefore the majority of our clients are triaged as requiring direct provision only. Many of these are the frail elderly from whom we regularly receive requests for a 'lighter' wheelchair which we are unable to offer. As Jane highlighted, many of the prescribed wheelchairs are not then used. Research by Mann et al (2002) report that 30% of frail elders do not use their prescribed wheelchair due to factors such as being 'unable to self-propel' and 'chair is too heavy'. This suggests the possibility that by not assessing all our most vulnerable and frail clients face to face, we are failing to identify factors impacting on their only means of independent mobility. Our service has taken this on board, and we are developing a pilot project with the aim of identifying a sample of frail, elderly clients who are struggling to self-propel and requesting a lighter chair to see if fine-tuning the wheelchair can have positive, measurable outcomes in terms of independent mobility, perceived self-efficacy and fatigue.

On the train back from Leeds my colleague and I were enthused by all the positive work being carried out throughout the country and, as stated above, attending the conference has motivated us to start making changes to our current practice, albeit small steps ..... *The Journey of a thousand miles begins with one step* - Lao Zhu

## References

Mann, C., Goodall, S., Justiss, M., Tomita, M., 2002 Dissatisfaction and non-use of assistive devices among frail elders. *Assistive Technology* 14:130-139

World Health Organisation

<http://www.who.int/disabilities/technology/wheelchairpackage/wstpintermediate/en/>

[file:///C:/Users/Charlotte/Downloads/9789241505765\\_eng\\_trainersmanual.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Charlotte/Downloads/9789241505765_eng_trainersmanual.pdf)

**Charlotte Wright**

**Occupational Therapist**

**Brighton Wheelchair Service**