PMG 2016: Learning the ropes

Back when I was studying to become a physiotherapist in 2014, I never thought I would end up working in the world of wheelchair provision. That’s not to say I was against the idea, it just had never really entered my head. The main reason for this was that the topic was not even covered as a subject on my course. I had never even heard of the Posture and Mobility Group (PMG) until I began my role within Guy’s and St Thomas’ (GSTT) wheelchair service in 2015! However since being introduced to the organisation it has become an invaluable resource to me, especially during my early days in the service where the learning materials it provided really helped me get up to speed quickly.

So I was delighted when I was lucky enough to be awarded a bursary for this year’s PMG conference in Birmingham’s International Convention Centre. It was my first opportunity to attend the organisation’s annual conference, and I looked forward to the opportunity it would provide me to improve my knowledge of postural management techniques and the multiple devices utilised in the field. I was also excited for the platform it would provide me to build relationships with other professionals, hopefully gaining some valuable advice and insight along the way.

As expected, the quality parallel sessions and free paper presentations throughout the conference were outstanding and covered a host of interesting topics. I particularly enjoyed Sam Esson’s presentation on 3D printing and its practical applications for wheelchair services. The usage of emerging technologies in healthcare is something I find very exciting so to hear what potential uses this technique might have was of particular interest.

I also enjoyed the parallel sessions delivered by the European Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel (EPUAP). Pressure management for the wheelchair bound client is something I have to deal with daily in my role as many of the clients I see struggle to effectively pressure relive due to weakness and inhibited sensation. Both of these talks provided me with enlightening viewpoints that could be transferable to my own clinical practice.

As I have mentioned earlier, I felt that the curriculum covered on my course regarding wheelchair provision was something that was lacking. So it was refreshing to be present for the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) talk regarding wheelchair service training packages. The organisation has developed a series of training packages that would be beneficial to individuals across the spectrum of wheelchair provision from volunteers to wheelchair service managers.

People from developing nations are often dependent on the donations of equipment from wealthier countries. This inevitably leads to many wheelchairs being issued which are either of poor quality or unsuitable for either for the client or the environment. Unfortunately, it is often the case that staff involved with provision are not always trained adequately to ensure clients with disabilities have a suitable wheelchair, something I have seen first-hand on a previous volunteering trip in Kenya. The main purpose of these training packages is to develop the minimum skills and knowledge required by personnel involved in wheelchair service delivery, which will empower both the patient and clinician to make more informed decisions regarding care.

They feel this training also has a place in the training of the next generation of healthcare professionals in the UK. An important aim of the WHO is to get the training packages integrated into the syllabus of courses such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, prosthetics and orthotics, nursing. I feel this would improve the general awareness within the NHS workforce regarding the key risk factors to watch out for with wheelchair bound clients and would inevitably improve the quality of referrals received by wheelchair services a great deal.

More information regarding these learning resources can be found at: http://www.who.int/disabilities/technology/wheelchairpackage/en/

Overall the conference was an absolutely brilliant experience and extremely well run. The opportunities for learning and networking were fantastic and have really allowed me to reflect on my own practices. The staff at the ICC also deserve high praise for their helpful attitude and for putting on a wonderful gala dinner which went on long into the night. I look forward to more of the same next year!