This year I attended the PMG conference for the first time. This was made possible by the receipt of a bursary from PMG. I decided that I would take the opportunity to book onto the pre conference training running on the Monday before PMG. This was the ISWP (International Society of Wheelchair Professionals) basic training with practical wheelchair skills workshop. The ISWP training consisted of online information and test to be completed in advance,the face to face training and a repeat of the online test after. There was then an option to complete the intermediate level online after this basic training.

The pre training information and test were interesting and challenged you to think about wheelchair provision not only from the point of view of what we as wheelchair services can provide in this country, but also about wheelchair provision around the world. I had some difficulties with the system recording my completion of these elements (you were not able to attend the face to face training without having completed these) however this was quickly rectified with an email to Ffion at PMG who was able to help.

So I hear you ask, how was the training? Well firstly it was a smaller group than I expected with 8 participants and 2 trainers. Apparently there was space for 20 people in this session. This small group did not at all detract from the training; in fact it made it easier to have more in depth conversations and share knowledge and skills. The training was described as basic and this initially proved to be the case. We looked at what a wheelchair consists of, taking measurements, filling out prescriptions and checking pressure. However, I believe that it is vital for all wheelchair professionals to have these basic skills and this course definitely ticked the box for that. Within these ‘basic’ skills there were hints and tips to make it easier, using clipboards to measure against to so you get a true measurement rather than just measuring between your hands and my favourite tip of putting your hand under one of clients feet on the footplate and the other under the thigh and seeing if the pressure is about the same into both hands. In my opinion, that is where the basic bit of the course ended because our discussions about the case studies, our own experience and advice from the trainers went into much more advanced details. We discussed complex patients and clinical reasoning for deciding on wheelchair prescriptions. There was never a wrong answer but it was interesting to hear where people differed in their opinions and why.

After a break for lunch we began the practical skills session, this part was being lead by two trainers from Back-up (a charity that supports people who have experienced a spinal injury). The practical session was an eye-opener for me in a number of ways. Firstly, the trainers, who were both wheelchair users themselves, talked about their injuries and their chairs. They commented that it had taken a number of years (5 years to be exact) of trial and error to know what they wanted and also needed from their chair. This made me think about clients who have spinal injuries and present to our service. They often want the highest specification chair with all the adaptations (understandably so having just had a major life change and wanting to be able to manage as independently as possible) but is this actually what is needed? It might be a better approach to prescribe a more basic lightweight chair and an appointment to review what is going well or not so well in a couple of months. Do we need to be more honest and say this process can take years to get the chair that is right for you?

The second thing that I took from this training was whilst you can get the lightest and highest specification chair around, if its not configured right for you then it will be no easier to propel than a basic chair. This was compounded when I found I was able to wheel more easily in a basic chair than one of the lightweight chairs that was much too high (seat height) and wide for me.

The third thing that I took from this part of the training is that propelling a chair is not only hard work but it takes a lot of courage at times. We were doing basic wheelchair skills such as up and down slopes, lifting the front wheels and going up and down curbs. Going towards an immovable object and knowing that you have to time it exactly right to flip up your front wheels otherwise you will hit it (I did a few times) is very scary. I tried to imagine how it would feel if I was reliant on my chair and hitting something could result on me being on the floor unable to get up. In one word this would be terrifying. And don’t get me started on the more complex skills that the trainers showed us, backwheel balancing down a slope or going down stairs forwards (whilst back wheel balancing).

This made me think, we give clients wheelchairs, see them for a short time and send them off happy in the knowledge that they have a suitable wheelchair. We have the basic assessment and provision sorted but do we think enough about the emotional challenges, physical challenges and time it will take for our clients to become comfortable, confident and proficient wheelchair users? This training course had made me think about what I do, how I do it and the clients I work with and I feel I will be a better clinician from it.