

If the wheelchair fits, it's easier to bear it

By Ellen Waldman

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As this New Year begins, and many of you are reading this column in your favorite chair, it's a good reminder that, for some, their chair is on wheels. The body does what it does as it ages, despite what all of us work so hard to maintain. The prospect of spending the majority of a day in a wheelchair is daunting and can cause a lot of grief, physical and otherwise, for people. The bright lining is, should this happen, there is a wonderful resource in Medford that can make this transition work better than it might otherwise, by fitting the person to the best chair possible.

When I first met Jan, she was in a wheelchair that looked like it was made for someone much smaller than she was. When sitting, her legs extended way beyond the seat and there was no real support for her upper back. She had dementia, and spent most of her day in the chair, but it was the regular type you see in most places.

It did not recline, lift up and down, or do much of anything besides barely keep her in the seat. It did not even have foot rests. Clearly, this was not comfortable and she did not like it one bit. Most people would assume that this is just how things go when you need to use a wheelchair, but in fact, there is a whole world of options available. Enter the Asante Wheelchair and Seating Assessment Clinic at Asante Outpatient Rehabilitation Services (781 Black Oak Dr. Suite 101, Medford; 541-789-4255).

After Jan had a face-to-face visit with her primary physician, he sent a referral to this clinic for an evaluation for the correct chair, based on her needs. A referral for a wheelchair assessment will generally cover the following areas: patient info, including medical history; whether they can self-propel indoors or outdoors; what their current equipment is; and how they intend to use this.

An appointment was made at the wheelchair clinic and here's what happened. Attending this initial meeting was an occupational therapist (OT) and the medical equipment supplier for the wheelchair. Locally, this is NuMotion (www.numotion.com; 4823 Industry Dr., Central Point; 541-772-1771). The supplier from NuMotion and the therapist had worked together in the past, and knew how to address the insurance, medical, and functional needs.

The OT reviewed the medical history with Jan and her advocate. Most importantly, Jan was carefully measured in order to have a chair that correctly addressed her body's needs and abilities. This would be a manual chair, even though she could not propel herself, but since she lived in a care facility, this was not a problem.

What was important, though, was to ensure that Jan could be tilted into a reclining posture several times a day to take the weight off her lower back. It also needed to be raised and lowered for easy access into bed. Here are some other important considerations for making recommendations for a particular chair: to maximize safety; improve posture and function; optimize seating comfort; prevent complications and skin problems caused by improper seating; and finally, one that Medicare would cover.

The chair was ordered, and luckily, was ready to be delivered in a couple of weeks. NuMotion brought it to the facility where Jan lived and set it up in place. The staff was instructed on how to maneuver this chair in order to get maximal benefit from its features. Best of all, in Jan's mind, was its color (red), her favorite color, and she immediately loved her new chair. It's been many months now, and she continues to enjoy the newfound support and comfort this specialized evaluation and assessment provided for her.

For many people, it's not necessary to get quite this detailed. If a simple wheelchair is all you need, in that case, call or visit Scott Armas, medical equipment specialist at Ashland Drug (53 North 2nd St.; 541-482-3366). He will provide all the info you need for the right wheelchair. But if, like Jan, your needs are a bit more complex, especially if most of the day is spent in this chair, then consider a visit to the wheelchair clinic at Asante.