

Integrated Wheelchair and P+O Services

Sarah Beattie - Motivation, Christine Cornick - Motivation

Background

In industrialised countries wheelchair services form an integral part of allied health services alongside other assistive technologies such as prosthetics and orthotics. Conversely in non-industrialised countries wheelchair provision generally exists in the form of isolated production workshops or at best as an add-on to a higher quality P+O service.

It is often noted that in developing countries more attention is paid to prosthetics than orthotics services despite the higher incidence of people needing orthotics. This observation can also be made about wheelchair in relation to P+O services.

Wheelchair services are neglected due to a combination of factors. The absence of professional training in wheelchair technology has led to a lack of advocates for wheelchair services within the rehabilitation sector.

Few INGOs are tackling wheelchair services in non-industrialised countries, in contrast to the large numbers involved in P+O services, leaving wheelchair provision off the agenda and marginalised within the development sector.

The current lack of structure within wheelchair services leads to small scale production workshops selling poor quality wheelchairs without the necessary assessment, prescription and fitting, often leading to secondary complications.

The authors suggest that the opportunity exists for an integrated approach to the development P+O and wheelchair services in non-industrialised countries. The common challenges faced by P+O and wheelchair Services in developing countries provide a platform for a valuable collaboration between the two fields. The common issues within P+O and Wheelchair Services are as follows:

Technology P+O and Wheelchair production both involve similar technology and face the same debate regarding the level of technology appropriate for production in non-industrialised countries.

Training The initiation of the World's first Wheelchair Technologist Training Course (WTTC) at TATCOT has fueled the debate regarding appropriate levels of professionalisation of technicians involved in wheelchair services, echoing the current debate within the P+O field.

Distribution The nature of both P+O and wheelchair production makes it difficult to

decentralise services; the shared challenge is to provide quality services for all.

Financing of Services Disability and poverty are inextricably linked. People with mobility disabilities in non-industrialised countries generally cannot afford the equipment they need, making financing the most serious issue services face.

Exclusion People with mobility disabilities face social and physical barriers limiting their participation in society.

Recycled or donated equipment The issues that donated equipment raise are common to both P+O and wheelchair services, and would benefit from being addressed by a united group.

Method

In Sri Lanka, Motivation has taken an integrated approach to the mobility equipment service sector and has been working with six local DPO partners to integrate, develop and upgrade the network of P+O and Wheelchair services. The partner DPOs have been providing either P+O or wheelchair services or both.

The aim of the programme is to develop a comprehensive mobility equipment service structure that provides a high quality service for all people with mobility disabilities.

Results

The benefits of collaborations and networking between the actors in the sector have been numerous.

Wheelchair workshops are learning from the more established and systematic P+O services. P+O services have been able to participate in peer group training activities until now run by wheelchair users; working to maximize peoples' mobility skills, health and independence.

A linked programme to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the mainstream workplace has been extremely successful, and with one voice the groups are advocating to put rehabilitation and equipment service provision on the Government agenda.

Conclusion

The many issues shared by Prosthetics, Orthotics and Wheelchair Services in developing countries highlight an opportunity to advocate for integration of these services to ensure that assistive technology in non-industrialised countries is developed as a comprehensive strategy.