

# Mobility and Social Isolation

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Wednesday 13th March 2013 was NHS Change Day. NHS staff were encouraged to do something different on that day. I used the opportunity to promote International Wheelchair Day (which was on 1st March) by spending a working day in a wheelchair.

I arrived at work at 9am. The wheelchair was waiting for me. I took some time to work out how to get it ready for use, and realised that I needed a spanner to adjust the foot plates. I hadn't realised that I needed to be an engineer just to use the wheelchair!

What struck me about the day was how the little things which we all take for granted became so much more difficult. Things like getting through doors, closing toilet doors behind us, crossing a room with a cup of tea. Just getting to a desk was difficult. The building I work from is old, and we have no lift. My usual desk is on the 2nd floor.

We had arranged with the staff working downstairs for me to have somewhere to work. There was one thing, however, which I really wasn't expecting; the social isolation. Being unable to share a room with my usual team, being unable to ask the Office Manager what time the meeting is, being unable to nip down the corridor to ask someone their advice. I was stuck downstairs in a building with no lift, and even if there had been a lift, I would have thought twice before making the trip.

Now, I felt isolated while surrounded by the friendly staff from a different team for one morning. Some patient I see on home visits may spend their whole day at home with carers nipping in two or three times a day, being otherwise left alone, unable to go out, or even sometimes unable to get out of the chair, or out of bed without assistance. Intentionally reducing my mobility for a day has opened my eyes to how awful this can be.

By midday I was feeling isolated from my team, was developing backache from sitting down all morning and the cuffs on my shirtsleeves were getting dirty from self-propelling the chair. I was beginning to wonder how my trip in a taxi this lunchtime was going to go. We had to move two cars to get me out of the building. As we have no disabled staff assigned to work out of the building, and already have a car park issue, people have taken to parking in the disabled spaces.

The taxi arrived on time and I was dealt with efficiently and professionally. Being wheeled up a ramp into the vehicle which was then clamped to the floor was an experience, but I felt safe and looked after. Apparently it costs about £5000 to modify a vehicle for wheelchair use. It cost me £22 for a 10 mile journey.

My final journey at the end of the day was back in another wheelchair taxi, facing backwards this time and again securely fastened in. An attempt to regain access

to the building via the disabled ramp was thwarted by the bottom of the ramp not being flush with the floor. I could not get the front wheels of the chair onto the ramp. I struggled around a narrow pavement to get to the front door instead.

So, what have I learned from this experience?

Firstly, that I will be much more aware of the difficulties facing wheelchair users in just getting about. Everything was so much more difficult than I ever expected, and I have now found respect for people in wheelchairs who just get on with it and make it look easy.

Secondly, that of all the challenges of the day, the social isolation during the morning was the worst. I was unable to be sat with my team, and unable to get to them. I was not expecting this to feel as difficult as it was.

Finally, that although I could have imagined what it would have been like spending time in a wheelchair, it was only when I actually did it that I really began to understand

So, what is my response to this?

Spending a day in a wheelchair in the end has led me away from thinking about the practical difficulties (although there were many), and to thinking once again about the importance of always placing the person at the centre of what I am trying to do. Spending time in their shoes, or in this case on their wheels, has challenged my views.

