

Choosing a commode for the ward environment

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Abstract

The choice of appropriate equipment to promote patient independence and enhance nursing care is of major concern to the nurse in the ward environment. This article reports on a recent evaluation of specialist commodes, (Ballinger et al, 1994), with reference to the programme funded by the Medical Devices Agency, Department of Health, under whose auspices the project was carried out. The results of user evaluations and technical tests of six mobile commodes are presented, the preferred model being the Mayfair commode supplied by Carters (J&A) Ltd. The article concludes by identifying a number of important considerations to bear in mind when selecting a commode.

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Nurses on the ward are increasingly faced by a bewildering number of new products designed to assist them in helping patients with activities of daily living. Extravagant claims are sometimes made by manufacturers about their products, and there is a paucity of readily available literature or objective information to help nurses select which items to purchase.

The Medical Devices Agency (MDA) at the Department of Health (DoH) has

recently funded a project designed to evaluate a selection of mobile, armchair, folding and bed-attached commodes. The project was carried out by staff at the Southampton Disability Equipment Assessment Centre (DEAC) and the report, which was published in November 1994 (Ballinger et al, 1994), is one of a series available free to NHS and social services staff. The series includes evaluations of products that assist with mobility and activities of daily living and urological equipment.

Background to programme

In the 1970s and 1980s, therapists in particular were familiar with the multidisciplinary A4 reports published by the DoH as part of its Disability Equipment Assessment Programme. The reports contained details of studies, funded on a 'one-off' basis, that were designed to evaluate a variety of aids and equipment used, for example, in bathing, children's seating, dressing, driving and food preparation. In recognition of the expertise acquired by

Table 1. Details of Disability Equipment Assessment Centres

Location	Staff	Equipment remit	Address
Southampton	Occupational therapists Physiotherapists	Equipment to assist with daily living	Disability Equipment Assessment Centre, Uni Rehab Research Unit Southampton General Hospital Tremona Road SO16 6YD Tel (01703) 794576
Bath	Physiotherapists Occupational therapists	Equipment to assist with daily living	Evaluation Centre Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases Upper Borough Walls Bath BA1 1RL Tel (01225) 465941 x 293
London	Nurses	Urological equipment	Evaluation Centre St Pancras Hospital 4 St Pancras Way London NW1 0PE Tel 0171 530 3302

‘Each subject was required to sit on all six mobile commodes in a predetermined random order for not longer than 10 minutes each. After each trial period a questionnaire was administered to determine users’ views of the commode on a number of criteria: appearance; height; width; depth; ease of getting on and off; security; and overall satisfaction.’

researchers in carrying out these projects, the DoH, via the MDA, established a number of centres to carry out a rolling programme of evaluation projects, known as DEACs. Details of these centres are shown in *Table 1*. The reports produced by the DEACs have been redesigned to make them more user-friendly and the series has been renamed ‘Disability equipment assessment’.

Commode evaluation: method

An initial evaluation of basic commodes was completed by the Southampton DEAC in 1993 (Ballinger et al, 1993) and a subsequent study included the major remaining categories of commodes (excluding sanichairs) — mobile, armchair, folding and bed-attached. Each of these categories was evaluated using slightly different methods in recognition of the fact that each type is suited to different users and environments.

A preliminary survey indicated that mobile commodes are most widely used on hospital wards, and therefore the rest of this article focuses on this range. The

other commodes evaluated are detailed in the final report available from the MDA (address at end of article).

In the marketing literature there is much confusion over terminology, and the descriptors ‘commode’, ‘sanichair’ and ‘showerchair’ are sometimes used interchangeably. However, in the context of this study, a sanichair has no pan and is used exclusively over a toilet. A mobile commode utilizes a pan, either permanent or disposable, and can be used independently of a toilet. A shower chair may be used as a commode if a pan is inserted.

Six products were selected as being representative of the many mobile commodes currently on the market (*Table 2*).

Fifteen current mobile commode users with a variety of disabilities were recruited to the study. They came from a variety of environments, including hospital wards and nursing homes. Each subject was required to sit on all six mobile commodes in a predetermined random order for not longer than 10 minutes each. After each trial period a questionnaire was administered to

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Table 2. The six mobile commodes

Reference number	Name	Supplier
1.1	Carters shower chair 233 40 81 72	Carters (J & A) Ltd South Road Bridgend Industrial Estate Bridgend Mid Glamorgan CF31 3PY
1.2	Mayfair commode 5HC25 740BR PPR PP	Carters (J & A) Ltd South Road Bridgend Industrial Estate Bridgend Mid Glamorgan CF31 3PY
1.3	Commode chair	Gallops Hospital Equipment Finere Road Eastbourne Sussex BH21 8QG
1.4	1367 Sanichair with detachable padded arms	Sidhil Care Boothtown Halifax West Yorkshire HX3 6NT
1.5	Eskdale sanichair	James Spencer & Co Ltd Moor Road Works Headingley Leeds LS6 4BH
1.6	Welsh mobile commode	James Spencer & Co Ltd Moor Road Works Headingley Leeds LS6 4BH

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determine users' views of the commode on a number of criteria: appearance; height; width; depth; ease of getting on and off; security; and overall satisfaction. Each of these criteria was scored on a 5-point Likert scale and comments were noted.

In addition, five hospital wards and one nursing home used the six commodes for a period of 1 week each and comments by staff on the performance of the commodes were noted. In this way the carers' view was also recorded.

The commodes were finally tested for strength and stability in a laboratory using tests derived from BS 4875 Strength and Stability of Furniture (British Standards Institution, 1985) and BS 4751 British Standard Specification for Mobile Sanitary Chairs (British Standards Institution, 1984).

Commode evaluation: results

The percentage and number of users stating that they were 'satisfied'/'very satisfied' with the six sample commodes are shown in *Table 3*.

Qualitative data in the form of comments noted at the time of evaluation indicated that many of the users found the Mayfair commode comfortable, with specific mention being made of the backrest. This point was reinforced by carers. Users also liked the appearance of this commode; comments included the fact that it looked 'like an ordinary chair' and that it was 'good looking'. Carers' comments included the fact that it was easy to manoeuvre, that the arms were easy to remove and that it was a good size.

Conversely, users mentioned that they found some of the other sample commodes uncomfortable (commodes 1.3 and 1.6), that a large wheelbase can make transferring difficult (commodes 1.3 and 1.5) and that the relative length of the footrests/footplate is important in influencing overall comfort (specific problems in this respect were identified with commodes 1.3 and 1.5).

Carers mentioned the difficulty in applying brakes and problems with safety once applied (commodes 1.1 and 1.4). Difficulties in removing or cleaning the pan were mentioned (commodes 1.1, 1.3 and 1.5) and concern was expressed over the height of commode — either too high (commode 1.5) or too low (commode 1.6).

Overall, the Mayfair commode supplied by Carters (J & A) Ltd (commode 1.2) was the most satisfactory mobile commode evaluated (*Figure 1*). However, it failed one of the technical tests, BS 4875 Part 1, Test 2, Back Static Load. This failure occurred when load was applied to the flexible upholstered backrest which resulted in the vertical posts of the backrest bending. However, it was felt that this would not be a significant problem that was likely to occur in clinical use.

Considerations in selecting mobile commodes

The final report of this study (Ballinger et al, 1994) includes a section identifying important points to consider when selecting a commode. These can be grouped under three headings: functional consider-

Table 3. Percentage and number of users stating that they were 'satisfied'/'very satisfied' with each of six sample mobile commodes

Commode reference number	Price (as of Autumn 1992)	Total number of users evaluating product	Number of users stating 'satisfied'/'very satisfied' with product	Percentage of users stating 'satisfied'/'very satisfied' with product
1.1	£352.50	14	9	64%
1.2	£200.50	15	13	87%
1.3	£168.15	11	4	36%
1.4	£ 83.70	14	5	36%
1.5	£157.26	15	9	60%
1.6	£ 41.91	10	4	40%

ations; user and carer considerations; and environmental considerations.

Functional considerations

- Will the commode need to be adjustable for multiple users, e.g. length of footrests, height of arms?
- Is the commode constructed of material that can be cleaned effectively (thus preventing cross infection)?
- Do disposable pans fit the commode, or is the commode pan compatible with the ward pan washer?
- Is the commode required to combine several functions? For example, if also used as sanichair, pushbar at back may prevent correct fitting over toilet pan and/or cistern and, if also required as



Figure 1. The Mayfair commode.

KEY POINTS

- Reports published in the Disability Equipment Assessment (DEA) series by the Department of Health provide results of evaluations of a range of products used by health-care workers and disabled people.
- Under the DEA programme, user-based evaluations are carried out by groups of occupational therapists, physiotherapists and nurses in three Disability Equipment Assessment Centres (DEACs) located in Southampton, Bath and London.
- The subjects of a recent evaluation project carried out by the Southampton DEAC were mobile, armchair, folding and bed-attached commodes.
- The mobile commode favoured by both users and carers was the Mayfair commode supplied by Carters (J & A) Ltd.
- When selecting a commode for the ward environment, purchasers are advised to take functional, user and carer and environmental features into consideration.

showerchair, product should be both rustproof and waterproof.

- Who will be moving the commode? For example, if self-propelled, feet of user must reach floor and if attendant-propelled pushbar at back should be considered, and feet of user must clear ground, preferably on footrests.

User and carer considerations

- Is appearance of commode acceptable?
- Is it comfortable, e.g. design and height of seat, padded upholstery?
- Is commode stable when braked? Will user or attendant apply brakes? In addition, ease of braking/releasing, efficiency of brakes, number and configuration of brakes must be considered
- Can the pan be removed while user is still seated to facilitate personal cleaning?
- Does commode have features which make transferring more easy, e.g. removable armrests/footrests, hinged footplate, absence of pushbar, securely fitting overseat?

Environmental considerations

- Does environment permit easy manoeuvring, e.g. space, floor covering?
- Is there sufficient space for storage when not in use?

Conclusions

It is imperative that nurses purchase and use equipment that is safe, functional, cost-effective and acceptable to the individual for whom they are caring. There is little information on available products and therefore the DEA series published by the MDA provides an invaluable guide to the selection of equipment used in the hospital and home environments.

For more information about the DEA series and a copy of the report on which this article was based contact: Medical Devices Agency, Room 2/FO5, Crown Buildings, Kingston By-Pass, Surbiton Surrey KT6 5QN. Tel: 0181 268 4100.



- Ballinger C, Pain H, Pascoe J, Gore S, McLellan DL (1993) *Basic Commodes: A Comparative Evaluation DEA A5*. HMSO, London
- Ballinger C, Pain H, Pascoe J, Gore S, McLellan DL (1994) *Mobile, Armchair, Folding and Bed-Attached Commodes: A Comparative Evaluation. DEA A9*. HMSO, London
- British Standards Institution (1984) *British Standard Specification for Mobile Sanitary Chairs*. British Standards Institution, London
- British Standards Institution (1985) *Strength and Stability of Furniture. Part 1: Methods for Determination of Strength of Chairs and Stools. Part 2: Methods for Determination of Stability of Chairs and Stools*. British Standards Institution, London