

Providing convenient and accessible toilet facilities

Going to the toilet is a natural, everyday activity that most of us take for granted. Within our own home we may have well-equipped bathrooms and toilets suited to our needs, but outside of our homes, amenities offered by retail premises such as large department stores, shopping centres or cafés often have an absence of suitable toilet facilities. This article demonstrates that with thought and relatively minor adaptations, individuals can be assisted to use the toilet. It concentrates on two main aspects: practical and cultural considerations.

For many people with mobility difficulties, accessing and using toilets away from home can be a stressful and difficult experience. Fortunately, most towns have an accessible toilet that is operated by a key obtained from the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR; www.radar.org.uk), tourist offices and some local authorities. The whereabouts of all National Key Scheme (NKS) toilets are listed in RADAR's (2005) *NKS Guide*, a useful publication to help locate accessible toilets for trips out with residents.

Practical considerations

When designing products and buildings, average limb lengths, height and range of movement (anthropometrics) are used. Sometimes, access to the toilet area may be adequate, but if a toilet door opens inwards, this restricts the space. In a small cubicle, it may be difficult to close the door and for people encumbered by children, shopping bags or luggage, this often requires the occupant to move to the side to close and open the doors.

The *Building Regulations – Part M* (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004) recognize that 'the provision of an enlarged cubicle in a separate-sex toi-

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Julie Swann explores some of the practical problems associated with going to the toilet for older and disabled people, and suggests ways of minimizing the difficulties.

let washroom can be of benefit to ambulant disabled people, as well as parents with children, and people (e.g. those with luggage) who need an enlarged space'.

People using walking aids or a wheelchair and those who need assistance may not be able to gain access without leaving the door open. This can be a very humiliating experience. With foresight, most cubicles could easily have been made longer. Now the *Building Regulations* state that all toilet doors on new property with public access should open outwards. Outward-opening doors provide greater access in an emergency, for example if a person has had a fall in the cubicle.

When designing accessible toilets, particularly in care homes, the *Building Regulations* are a useful guide and should be followed for all new property. These regulations take into consideration the needs of people with visual or hearing impairments, people with learning difficulties and people whose lack of tactile sensitivity can cause them to be injured by touching hot surfaces. Vital factors include the following.

Visual contrast

Part of the *Building Regulations* for public buildings states that 'the surface finish of sanitary fittings and grab bars contrasts visually with background wall and floor finishes, and there is also visual contrast between wall and floor finishes'. Several companies retail toilets, washbasins and handrails that

comply with the regulations, with contrasting handrails and seats – for example, DisabledToilets.co.uk and RDK Mobility (see *Useful Contacts*).

Decorating the toilet walls in a contrasting colour to the handrail, basin and toilet will help people who are visually impaired, as will supplying coloured toilet paper.

Doors and internal space

Doors that contrast with the wall colour are easier to locate. Door handles should contrast with the door and should be usable with a closed fist (ODPM, 2004); for example, automatic or lever handles. Doors should open easily (with less than 20 N of force). A horizontal closing bar fixed to the inside face makes closure easier for a wheelchair user.

Locks

Locks should be usable with one hand by a person with limited dexterity; for example, light-action privacy bolts (ODPM, 2004). In an emergency, doors should have a release mechanism capable of being opened from the outside (ODPM, 2004). Some of the new locks in public toilets have chunky grips but may be difficult to turn – a simple latch mechanism is easier.

Emergency pull cord

Pull cords for emergency alarms should have intact 50 mm bangles at two levels: one at 800–1000 mm and the other at 100 mm from the floor (ODPM, 2004); i.e. reachable from the floor if a fall occurs, and reachable from the toilet so that assistance can be summoned. The cords should be red, not white, as this prevents residents mistaking alarm cords for light pulls. To prevent accidental triggering, cords should not be placed near a handrail or toilet paper dispenser. They should not be tied out of reach.

Lighting

The *Building Regulations* state that 'switches with large push pads should be used in

preference to pull cords'. These, and automatic lighting, are easier to use.

Toilets

Toilets should be around 480 cm (19 inches) high (ODPM, 2004); therefore, some may need raising by a toilet seat, frame or combined seat and frame. For overweight residents, a combined toilet seat and frame or a commode over the toilet is useful, as this can take their weight, avoiding any damage to the toilet.

Contoured seats are comfortable and supportive. There are several padded or inflatable wipe-down seats that are useful for frail or thin people.

Toilet rails

Wall rails should assist in helping individuals to pull themselves up and should be sited within reach. Many toilets have rails that are in the wrong place. Drop-down rails help with pushing into a standing position and ideally, should be at hip level when standing. These must be firmly attached to a wall. The *Building Regulations* provide images of suggested layouts (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. The Building Regulations – Part M: Suggested layout for a toilet.

Toilet paper

Toilet paper must be within reach and extractable by one hand (ODPM, 2004). A

roll lock or interleaved paper will help if limited range of movement prevents extraction using a one-handed method.

PRACTICAL SERIES

Contrasting toilet paper helps residents who have visual impairments.

Knox (2001) suggests placing a small wastepaper bin with a removable plastic lining beside the toilet to dispose of the soiled paper.

Cleansing

A bidet bowl or an electrically powered 'add-on bidet' can be used on top of a toilet pan to rinse the peritoneal area.

Mirrors

A common mistake is to have several rows of tiling sited above the sink and then the mirror placed above. This can exclude those who use wheelchairs. Mirror tiles could be used instead, or a tilt mirror installed.

Wasbasins

Lever taps or sensor-operated taps are suitable for most hand problems. The *Building Regulations* state that 'the finger rinse basin and other accessories should allow a person to wash and dry hands while seated on the WC'. Consider supplying suction nailbrushes for one-handed users.

Towel rails and dispensers

Towels or hand dryers should be positioned within reach of wheelchair users and ambulant residents, and should be reachable from the toilet.

Ensuites

If toilets are low, a raised toilet seat can be provided in ensuites, perhaps with individually positioned handrails. The Department of Health (2004) states that Integrated Community Equipment Stores (ICES) should be willing to help care homes wherever possible, but that this will depend on local arrangements and resources. Help includes advice on equipment and equipment loans for individual users (Swann, 2005).

The Disabled Living Foundation (2003) factsheet *Choosing Toilet Equipment and Accessories* outlines some of the available equipment that may be of assistance.

Cultural considerations

It is important to be aware of a resident's cultural and religious requirements. Society and many cultures place emphasis on cleanliness, in both physical and spiritual

aspects, and prescriptive routines must be followed.

For example, the Khalifah Project (2004) notes that Muslims must 'enter the toilet with the left foot and leave with the right foot'. It is considered 'detestable' to stand while urinating. After using the toilet, purification of the peritoneal area by running water ('Istinja') is required. Therefore, to comply with some religious beliefs, bidets or basins should be provided in each toilet to enable people to wash themselves with running water.

Dependent patients may appreciate having a jug of warm water poured over their peritoneal area before being taken off the commode, bedpan or toilet.

Summary

On admission to a care environment, it is important to make no assumptions and to establish individual needs. Toileting is an area of everyday activity that individuals may find embarrassing to talk about, so it is critical for staff to use their initiative. Approaching the subject in an understanding way is the best style.

Within the home, attention needs to be paid to the practical environment by designing the living space to best effect. It is particularly important to ensure that residents' cultural needs are met and care staff must preserve individuals' dignity. **NRC**

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Disabled Living Foundation (2003) Choosing toilet equipment and accessories. www.dlf.org.uk/factsheets/pdf/Choosing_Toilet_Equipment_and_Accessories.pdf (accessed 9/6/05)

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) Building regulations – approved document M. Access to and use of buildings. www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_buildreg/documents/page/odpm_breg_025494.hcsp (accessed 9/6/05)

Khalifah Project (2004) <http://islamic-world.net/khalifah-project/Campaigns-Cleanliness.htm> (accessed 9/6/05)

Knox EA (2001) Tips on...toileting. www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/toilettips.html (accessed 9/6/05)

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (2005) *NKS Guide – Accessible Toilets For Disabled People*. RADAR, London

Swann J (2005) Equipment for living: the value of assistive devices. *Nurs Res Care* 7(2): 74–7

Useful information

- **RADAR**
250 City Road, London EC1V 8AF
Tel: 020 7250 3222
Fax: 020 7250 0212
radar@radar.org.uk
www.radar.org.uk
- **Homecraft Ability One**
Lowmoor Business Park, Kirkby-in-Ashfield
Nottinghamshire NG17 7ET
Tel: 08702 423234
Fax: 01623 755585
www.homecraftabilityone.com
- **Nottingham Rehab Supplies**
Findel House, Ashby de la Zouch
Leicestershire LE65 1NG
- **DisabledToilets.co.uk**
33 Rye Road, Hoddesdon, Herts EN11 0JE
Tel: 0871 200 2082
Fax: 01992 479 725
sales@disabledtoilets.co.uk
www.DisabledToilets.co.uk
- **RDk Mobility**
190 Tonge Moor Road, Bolton BL2 2HN
Tel: 0800 1075118
www.rdkmobility.co.uk

KEY POINTS

- **Ensure that cultural needs are met during toileting.**
- **Use building regulations as a template for public and communal areas.**
- **Establish individual needs and make no assumptions.**
- **Use visually contrasting materials to aid identification of fixtures.**
- **Adapt ensembles to individual needs and ensure that all items are in reach.**