Promoting dignity in care

Meredith Gresham reports on the promising results from a trial into the combined use of a toilet-seat bidet and mobile shower chair to reduce carer strain and improve dignity for older people requiring assistance with using the toilet.

We are all person-centred nowadays, right? Surely giving the person with dementia a sense of dignity is paramount in a person-centred approach? Apparently not. A 2009 investigation into privacy and dignity for older people in UK hospitals and care homes (Billings et al 2009) found that the most basic activity of daily living – going to the toilet – left a lot to be desired from the perspective of the older person in care.

Requiring help with this most intimate personal task was seen by older people interviewed for this study as an indignity in itself. Incontinence; having to wear incontinence pads; the need to ask to use the toilet; and the need for equipment such as hoists and commodes were just a few of the factors that compounded their sense of indignity. Perhaps worst of all was the suggestion from some busy staff that "you can 'go' in your pad".

'Behind Closed Doors'
The results of this investigation prompted a campaign called 'Behind Closed Doors' (www.bgs.org.uk/campaigns/dignity.htm). The campaign, supported by the British Geriatric Society, sought to highlight that vulnerable people, particularly those in care, have the basic human right to use the toilet, when they need it, and deserve to be offered the greatest amount of dignity during the process.

However, getting to and from, and having privacy whilst using the toilet is only one part of the equation. 'Behind Closed Doors' emphasised the basic human need for dignity around eliminatory functions, but the campaign did not address the question of dignity and privacy for those people who require another person to clean up after voiding bladder or bowels.

Incontinence and care
From the perspective of staff or family carers, supporting someone with incontinence, helping them use the toilet and clean after voiding is frequently difficult, even risky. Assisting a person to use the toilet is the most frequent personal care task undertaken in Australian residential aged care and the very nature of its frequency exposes staff to risk of injury (Cody & Grealy 2001).

Particularly distressing for carers and older people alike is when the process provokes verbal or physical aggression. A number of studies have demonstrated that aggression toward carers occurs most frequently in the context of personal care activities, including using the toilet (Zeller et al 2012; Lachs et al 2013; Schreiner et al 2001). A study by Ryden and Felt (1992) proposed that this type of aggression was explainable as a response to an invasion of personal space.

The benefits of bidets
An alternative to manual post-voiding cleaning is a wash-and-dry toilet-seat bidet. Still novel in Australia, these toilet...
The lower profile of the Coway BA13 toilet-seat bidet provided a good match for the ETAC mobile shower-commode chair. An unusual feature of the ETAC chair, compared to many other shower chairs, is an opening at the rear of the seat. This enabled effective use of the bidet spray mechanisms to reach and clean the perineum and peri-anal area. The rear opening of the seat of the chair also allowed care staff easier and more discreet access for additional post-toileting cleaning if required.

The ETAC seat was a good match in shape for the BA13 bidet, with the seat’s curved front apron preventing any potential spray or splash (an issue raised by staff during discussions), while being comfortable on the back of the resident’s knees. The ETAC chair has an easy-to-manoeuvre footrest with multiple height settings, two locking castors, and swinging-away arms that lock into position.

Promising advance
Care staff involved in the trial commented that the resident using the equipment (who has severe dementia) appeared to feel safe and stable on the chair, which made the process of using the toilet easier for both. The principle drawback was the inability to use the heated seat of the bidet, which had been of great help in encouraging the resident to remain seated on the bidet that was previously installed in her ensuite. The Coway BA13 bidet is operated via remote control by the carer, allowing them to make eye contact with the resident and offer reassurance during the cleaning procedure.

Conclusion
The bidet is a promising advance in dignity and hygiene for aged care residents and older people requiring personal care. Compatible equipment that supports safety and ease-of-use of the bidet is essential to further explore this intriguing assistive technology.

References