

## Postural care and protection of body shape

### Basic information sheet

#### What is postural care?

Postural care is a gentle form of physical therapy used to protect body shape. People who find it hard to move, at any age and for any reason, are at risk of developing changes in their body shape and these changes lead to secondary complications. People who find it hard to move during the day often spend the majority of the night in one position. Over time this position can become obligatory as their body shape may make it even harder to move or difficult to adopt alternative positions. In June 2009 the NHS/PASA Buyers Guide for night time positioning equipment stated that the following complications are associated with a failure to protect body shape.

- “The musculoskeletal system (contractures, loss of joint integrity, e.g. hip dislocation, decreased bone density, reduced range of joint motion and deformity, e.g. spinal scoliosis)
  - The neurological system (spasticity/muscle tone, primitive reflexes, altered sensation and joint position sense, pain, weakness)
  - Respiratory function
  - Digestion (including swallowing and choking, both of which are compromised by poor head and neck posture) and kidney/renal function
  - Personal hygiene, ease of toileting and changing
  - Functional ability
  - Environment interaction (sensory perception, body aesthetics, learning, communication)
  - Sleep pattern and irritability”

#### Isn't this happening already?

The provision of therapeutic positioning is patchy. There is very little evidence available for the standard of adult provision. The recent NHS Buyers Guide for night time positioning equipment for children stated that 54% of respondents to a survey of paediatric physiotherapists have a child on their caseload who does not have access to therapeutic positioning equipment. Of these 40% did not have access to funding. One can only assume that the situation for adults is worse as there are no charitable sources of funding for equipment.

The NHS/PASA Buyers Guide describes training for families and PAs as “vital” and that it is available from manufacturers. There are currently no clinical standards for training of company representatives selling night time positioning in the UK. Many therapists in the UK are increasingly frustrated by the lack of funding for equipment, a lack of awareness of their role in this field and are often managed within systems that do not reflect the hard work that is involved in supporting families to provide this fundamental care. Children are often assessed for need using functional assessments – this is not logical as some individuals will never make progress according to these scales, yet their body shape will deteriorate over time. We need to use measurement of body symmetry to assess whether we are effective in protecting body shape.

## **What are the cost implications of providing postural care?**

There are cost implications for training both healthcare professionals and families. Use of therapeutic positioning, particularly at night is dangerous. Thorough safety planning and assessment of competency should be part of a postural care pathway. Families are able to make informed choices only when they are in possession of comprehensive information and supported to weigh up risk and benefit. Sleep systems cost in the region of £400 to £3000. There is a new not for profit organisation supplying sleep system equipment [www.simplestuffworks.co.uk](http://www.simplestuffworks.co.uk)

## **What are the cost implications of failing to protect body shape?**

Consideration of the potential secondary complications outlined in The NHS/PASA Buyers Guide indicates considerable cost implications of a failure to protect body shape. Costs would be associated with surgical intervention, complex equipment for mobility as well as moving and handling, pressure care, adaptations to the home should hoists be required, enteral feeding, pain management and an increased need for medications such as Botox or Baclofen. The human cost to the individual and their family of experiencing avoidable secondary complications must not be forgotten. Ultimately changes in body shape lead to a loss of internal capacity, the contents of the abdomen invade the thorax, leading to premature death.

## **How do we know if therapeutic positioning is working?**

We can use very simple measures of body symmetry, non-invasive and statistically validated in 1992. These measures can be used by families to monitor progress and to ensure that body shape is being protected. They can also be used to hold service providers to account.

## **How do I find out more?**

You can take a look at our website [www.posturalcareskills.com](http://www.posturalcareskills.com) call or email us. We're happy to talk this through with anyone interested in moving this forward in their area. We are here to support therapists and service providers to understand the implications of therapeutic positioning and to improve access for families to person centred, timely provision of therapeutic positioning.

## **Further reading:**

Buyers Guide: Night Time Postural Management Equipment for Children. June 2009. NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency; Centre for Evidence Based Purchasing.

Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/ln7rjg>

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Available at: <http://www.iahpld.org.uk/>

Newlife Foundation, 2007. It's not too much to ask.

Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/nzyolq>