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Improving the Quality of Life of People with Physical Disabilities

AQA Information & Peer Support Update – December 2008

July – December 2008

This year the Peer Support team have provided support to over 95 patients in hospital facing life with a spinal cord injury. Five support visits were made to people in their homes and 20 people have visited the office in Fairfield for ongoing support and training in accessing computers.

This practical support has included:

- Encouragement and confidence building about leaving the hospital environment after a long period to return home
- Training in wheelchair use – and tips that make this easier
- Liaison between the patient and hospital staff – sometimes people find it easier to talk to a peer support person
- Talking about future employment – provide training and education options
- Liaison between client and professional educators – visits to AQA office to see a 'real' working environment
- Visits to various rehabilitation centres to support people with spinal cord injury
- Providing DVD stories about specific life situations – adapting home and employment situations when faced with a disability – in this instance using farming machinery
- Assisting several clients in tips about travelling
- Providing several peer contacts for people while at the hospital and then after returning to their community

Naz Erdem & Peter Van Benthem
AQA Peer Support Team

Meetings, planning, sharing

Regular team meetings help the team plan activities and service provision, share information and support each other.

Members and clients visit the team at the AQA office in Fairfield. A friendly and relaxed environment provides visitors with the opportunity to experience an accessible workplace. This is an important component of the support provided by this highly experienced team.



Country Spinal Review Clinics

Each year the AQA Peer Support team offer support to people attending spinal review clinics held in regional locations throughout country Victoria.

This year AQA attended 9 clinics. During these visits the Peer Support team have the opportunity to share information and 'check out' innovations that other people have made to improve their quality of life.

Here a member demonstrates his new wheelchair accessible 'self drive' van to one of the AQA team.



Mission
"Enabling People with Severe Physical Disabilities
Attain Maximum Independence"



Profile Story - Pradeep Hewavitharana – Volunteer at AQA

Pradeep has volunteered his time at AQA to not only gain work experience in Australia to broaden his opportunities but provide AQA with back-up assistance in our Accounts Department.

This is Pradeep's story and his experience of receiving peer support from AQA and what that has meant to him personally and in his career.



In 1999 Pradeep Hewavitharana sustained a T4/T6 incomplete spinal cord injury as the result of a scooter accident in Sri Lanka which left him with paralysis. After a short period of rehabilitation Pradeep commenced full-time employment, as welfare support is limited for people with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

Pradeep migrated with his family to Australia in August 2003 as a skilled migrant. Although he has a Major in Information Technology from Sri Lanka, gaining work experience and a permanent job in Australia wasn't easy. Pradeep decided another profession might prove more successful. In 2005 he completed an Advanced Diploma in Accountancy and began looking for employment in this field. This however still proved illusive due to his lack of Australian work experience.

While undertaking rehabilitation at the Victorian Spinal Cord Service (VSCS), at the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre in Kew, Pradeep attended one of the Life Skills sessions that are conducted by AQA and the VSCS. He met up with Naz Erdem and Peter Van Benthem, AQA peer support staff and was impressed by the service they offered to people with a spinal cord injury.

Discussions with the team highlighted the need for Pradeep to have an opportunity to gain work experience if he was to succeed in finding useful employment. To assist Pradeep gain work experience in his profession, AQA was able to offer him voluntary work in bookkeeping one day a week under the supervision of the AQA Accounts team.

For the last two years Pradeep has broadened his knowledge and training in bookkeeping, learned more about working in an office environment and contributed at the same time to AQA's Accounts department workload.

Pradeep says *"I am really impressed how people with disabilities help each other in Australia and the great job that the AQA Peer Support team do in providing information and support to others."*



Pradeep has now used the experience and knowledge he gained from the volunteer work at AQA to build on his previous knowledge and has started his own bookkeeping and mortgage brokering business.

"Most skilled migrants have many barriers in gaining work experience. Having a physical disability made some of the barriers even steeper for me. I am happy I met the Peer Support team, they have changed my life."

