Clinician’s Corner

Providing the Joy of Mobility to Our Friends in Peru

By Jodee Fortner, MS, PT, C/NDT

As a physical therapist, one does not go through the day without interacting with various types of equipment, whether therapeutic at a hospital or clinic or a patient’s personal device. When I first traveled to Peru on a medical mission trip, I saw how the patients had little access to medical equipment and how the lack of equipment, especially for postural support, can lead to devastating deformities, particularly for children with cerebral palsy. It is from that initial trip that we have worked hard to bring needed medical equipment to the country of Peru, and it has been a privilege to see how these devices have changed the lives of the children and adults with disabilities.

Providing Medical Equipment through Medical Ministry International

Once a year, our organization, Hope and Health Ministries by Medical Ministry International-Peru, which is supported by Medical Ministry International Canada, sponsors the shipment of a 40-foot container of physical therapy equipment to Peru by raising funds locally and in the USA. The majority of the container is comprised of wheelchairs for children and adults with disabilities, but we have also collected other donated equipment such as orthoses, braces, walkers, canes – you name it, we probably have one! We have been very fortunate to receive donations from many popular therapy companies such as Cascade Dafo, Inc. and the Benik Corporation. To my knowledge, there is no insurance company in Peru that will cover a wheelchair (except maybe car insurance after an accident, but it’s not common), and there are no pediatric wheelchairs available to buy in the city of Arequipa or its surrounding provinces. Hope Haven International Ministries may have a wheelchair fabrication site soon in Peru, which would be a great resource.

A Simple Wheelchair Can Change Participation

As mentioned above, the lack of postural care can lead to deformities in those with neurological problems. On a trip to a rural part of Ayacucho, Peru, I was able to do a home visit for a young man with cerebral palsy. When we entered the house, we found the young man sitting on the cold dirt floor on a blanket with his legs windswept to the side. He most likely had a hip that was dislocated from so much time in this position. The only wheelchair that we had at the time to give him was a standard wheelchair, but since his trunk control and posture was adequate, I felt that a standard wheelchair would be better for him than sitting on the floor. His mom would also then be able to transport
him within the house and even outside the house so that he could get some fresh air. Giving the gift of mobility to those who don't have the opportunity to access it through an insurance or other means is priceless.

Orthoses

If you are a pediatric therapist, it's very likely that the majority of your patients have orthoses. Can you imagine those children walking around without their orthoses and the potential risk for permanent deformities? Would you leave these feet untreated? Or would you order orthoses for them with your trusty orthotist and insurance company? Here in Peru, I have only had a handful of patients ever receive an orthosis from their insurance companies, and the most common style is a rigid non-articulating AFO. There is an orthosis similar to a DAFO made in the capital city of Lima, but at up to $800 a pair, they are not attainable for most patients. We have received the majority of our orthotic supplies from Cascade Dafo, who makes it possible for us to give out 150-200 pairs of orthoses annually and help children like the one pictured stand with better alignment.

Other Equipment Needs Fulfilled

Another piece of equipment that is rarely found here in Peru is a stander. Standers for children who cannot stand on their own have been shown to improve many aspects of the child's health. They are also very much desired here. We had the opportunity to receive the help of Scott Mitchell and his new organization, Stand with Me, who designed and implemented a workshop in Arequipa, Peru, for the manufacturing and distribution of wooden standers for children. These standers were designed to be made inexpensively but with a sturdy design to meet the standing needs of children 7-8 years or younger. The first shipment of about 20 standers was distributed in July of 2015 to various children in Arequipa. Seeing children who don't attempt to stand on their own positioned in the standing frame was truly inspirational.

A therapy tool widely used for children is a posterior walker, which we really lack here in Peru. But when you don't have a posterior walker and you really need one, you have to be creative and make one! This little guy with diplegia pictured above likes to push this adult walker in the forward position, but he walks on his tip-toes. So we put the wheels on the back, turned the walker around and voilà! We have made a shift to a posterior walker. With his orthoses and his new posterior walker, he now walks more flat footed and with an increased stride length versus his tippy toe fast walking with the previous technique. He is deaf, but after only a week, he now enters the walker and automatically turns around to use it in the posterior way. He loves to walk, so he is a very happy boy!
Conclusion

There really is no comparison between what children and adults with disabilities have access to in the United States versus other countries such as Peru. We are very thankful for all of the donations we have received to help us meet the needs of the various children and adults with disabilities here in Peru. I have learned how to do things I might not normally have done in a US clinic, such as modifying orthoses and wheelchairs as well as being creative to make just about anything that a patient might need. In some ways, our clinic is better stocked than your typical US clinic. Where else can you go into your warehouse and pull out five different braces for your patient to try out before you send them home with one? It has been a privilege to see how the various pieces of equipment that we have brought down to Peru have changed the lives of so many here. Please consider joining us in this project by donating funds to bring more equipment or you can also join us for a short term or long term service project at our clinic.

Jodee Fortner is a missionary physical therapist in Arequipa, Peru. She can be contacted at jodeefortner@yahoo.com. Jodee has been a pediatric therapist for 15 years. She completed her NDT certification with Jane Styer-Acevedo in 2009. Association MMI-Peru has sponsored short NDT courses with various instructors as well as the first certificate course in pediatrics in Arequipa with Suzanne Davis, Lezlie Adler, and Monica Wojcik in 2015.

Donations for medical equipment to ship to Peru can be made online using PayPal at I Care San Antonio, designating the gift for the Peru Physical Therapy clinic. The website is: www.icare-sa.org. The list of short term volunteer opportunities in Peru can be found at the website www.mmicanada.ca.