

Safety Considerations in the Bathroom Environment for Clients with a Disability and their Carers

This article outlines some of the hazards present in the bathroom environment that could impact upon the safety of clients and carers. Some suggestions to reduce risks and, therefore, improve safety are described.

Introduction

Within any residential, care or clinical setting, a bathroom will be used on a frequent basis for a range of personal activities of daily living. It is likely that it will be a shared space, used by more than one person. The nature of both the environment itself and the activities that take place within it present a number of hazards that may compromise the safety of users.

One example of a bathroom hazard would be a humid environment that can cause surfaces to become slippery which, in turn, may lead to a risk of falls. Further risks may be posed by the presence of additional factors, such as electricity, very hot water or delicate skin. More complex risks may arise when a user of the bathroom has a disability and requires assistance from others. In this instance the environment itself, the activities for which it is used and/or the abilities and needs of those who use it may all have an impact on safety.

Use of the Bathroom

The use of a bathroom will clearly vary between households and between a domestic household and a clinical or care setting. However, there will be some common ground in terms of the activities for which a bathroom is used. Routine activities that occur include toileting, washing, cleaning teeth, bathing, showering and dressing/undressing. In a setting where an individual's personal care is being provided, the bathroom may be used by more than one person at a time and the nature of the individual's care needs may demand more of the environment and its contents.

Features of a Bathroom Environment

The use of the bathroom will usually be reflected in its location within the larger environment. In a domestic setting, a bathroom will often be situated close to bedrooms, perhaps on the first floor of a two-storey house, away from the daily living space. In many instances, the bathroom will be the smallest room in the house. Within a care setting, it is possible that the bathroom may be larger to accommodate the presence of carers and the bathroom itself sited in a more convenient location, however this may be dependant upon whether or not the

care environment is purpose built. The requirement for services, particularly drainage and water, may sometimes dictate where a bathroom can be situated within a building.

A bathroom will usually house basic sanitary fixtures such as a toilet, basin, bath or shower unit plus some associated storage. In a care setting the bathroom may have to house additional equipment, such as mobility aids, and the sanitary fixtures themselves may need to be of a different design. For example, a wheelchair user may require a level access shower facility, rather than a bath.

Individual's Needs and the Role of Carers

For a person to be independent in personal activities of daily living, they will need a range of motor and sensory skills (such as balance, co-ordination, sitting and standing ability/tolerance, eyesight, awareness of temperature etc.) In some instances, individuals with functional limitations may be enabled to be independent through the provision of carefully selected equipment. Example of small equipment that individuals may use, or benefit from, include walking aids, wheelchairs, raised toilet seats, toilet frames, bath boards and shower chairs.

In other cases, where an individual requires assistance from others, the presence of such equipment may ease the task of assisting. When clients need assistance, carers may be required to:

- Assist with or facilitate transfers, for example wheelchair to toilet
- Help client to balance whilst standing/seated
- Physically carry out tasks for client, for example washing, dressing and personal hygiene.

Hazards presented

The combination of the bathroom environment and the activities and tasks carried out within it present a number of hazards to user safety. These include:

- Restricted space
- Obstructions caused by fixtures and equipment
- The presence of water and electricity
- The presence of toxic or infectious substances, for example cleaning materials, body fluids
- Wet and/or slippery floors and surfaces
- The possibility of slips, trips and falls for client or carer
- The possibility of burns, from hot water, radiators etc.
- The need for moving and handling

Reducing Risks

There are many approaches that can reduce the risks posed by hazards present in the bathroom environment and thus contribute to improved safety. These include:

- Raising a person's **awareness** regarding the presence of dangers and the potential risks.
- Educating bathroom users in **safe practices and techniques**. For example, clearing up a spillage and making use of storage may reduce the potential for falls.
- Providing **small aids or equipment** that will enable individuals or carers to carry out tasks more easily (Peach, 1994). For example, a raised toilet seat may help a person to stand up from the toilet independently; a shower seat may enable an individual to maintain their own balance whilst showering. Equipment like this is available for purchase from a range of suppliers and retail outlets. Some items may be available for loan through social service or care agencies and individuals can obtain advice regarding the suitability of equipment from independent advisory bodies, such as a Disabled Living Centre (Winchcombe, 2001).
- Carrying out **minor adaptations** to the environment to assist individuals and carers. For example, a strategically placed grab-rail may provide security and stability when standing or transferring; removing a bath mat may prevent trips; re-hanging a door could improve access for a person using a mobility aid.
- Considering **major adaptations** to improve the environment's suitability for the tasks carried out within it. For example, alterations to the layout may improve access to facilities; a change of floor surface may reduce the risk of slipping; installation of a level access shower, thermostatically controlled hot water system or automatic toilet may decrease the demands placed on carers.
- Provision of **moving and handling systems** to decrease the need for manual handling and the risks associated with it. For example, a standing or raising aid can facilitate toilet transfers; a mobile or ceiling track hoist can be used to enable access to showers or baths; the selection of an appropriate sling to meet task requirements, such as a toileting sling, may reduce the number of transfers required.
- Provision of **purpose built bathroom accommodation** either as part of a new build or as an extension to an existing property. The Buildings Regulations Approved Document M (1991) outlines requirements for facilities for disabled persons. It is now recognised that new housing should be built with features that accommodate the needs of disabled people, thus enabling them to access the general housing market as a basic civil right (Hall, 2001).

Conclusion

Bathroom safety can be markedly improved if time is spent exploring the activities and tasks undertaken in the environment and identifying the demands these will place on the environment and its users. Such analysis may suggest a need for equipment or adaptations (Disabled Living Foundation, 2001). If this is

the case, careful consideration should always be given to the social situation and environmental context before implementing any modifications. A shared area needs to meet the needs of all its users. Adaptations made to meet the needs of a person with a disability must also be suitable for others to use. Thought given to the current and future requirements of individuals and their environment, knowledge of the features and benefits of equipment and attention to design (Spindler, 2001) can all ensure that any changes made are both functional and acceptable. An understanding of the hazards presented by the bathroom environment, together with approaches that may be used to reduce or eliminate these, will contribute to improved safety for individuals and their carers.

END

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