ISSUE 3 2026

ROLLING INSPIRATION

The leading magazine for people with mobility impairments

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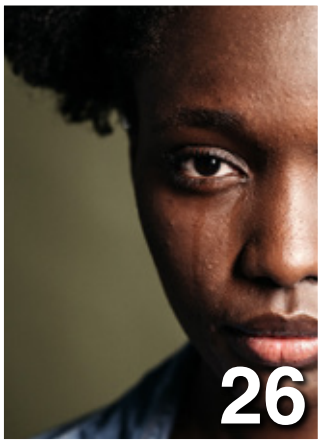

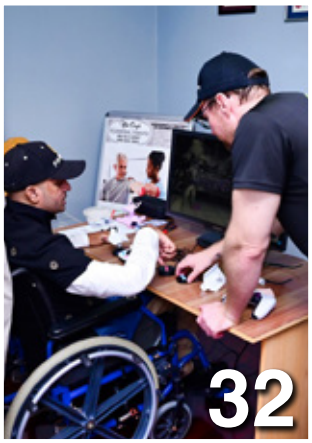

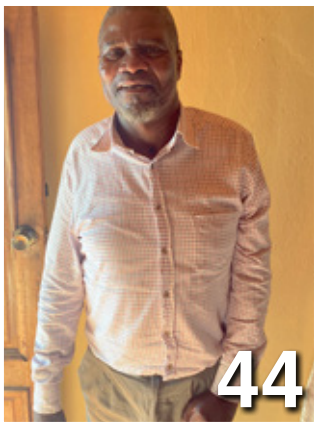

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Rolling Inspiration is published by the QuadPara Association of South Africa (QASA).

QASA visits Limpopo

In July, QASA travelled to the Limpopo as part of its Outreach Project. The goal of the project is to extend QASA's reach into more remote and rural parts of South Africa to assist quadriplegics and paraplegics.

During the visit to Limpopo, the team met with healthcare professionals and key stakeholders to establish and strengthen relationships. The visit also provided an opportunity to identify potential leaders who could join the organisation as Community Partners.

The QASA Community Partners assist with supporting quadriplegics and paraplegics in the province, acting as a representative and contact point for the organisation to ensure QASA services are available to all who need them.

QASA extends its sincerest gratitude to everyone who welcomed the organisation, shared their insights and committed to working with us. We look forward to making a difference in Limpopo! R

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The **QuadPara Association of South Africa** (QASA) is a non-profit organisation established and managed by quadriplegics and paraplegics that aim to empower quadriplegics and paraplegics to live their lives to their full potential.

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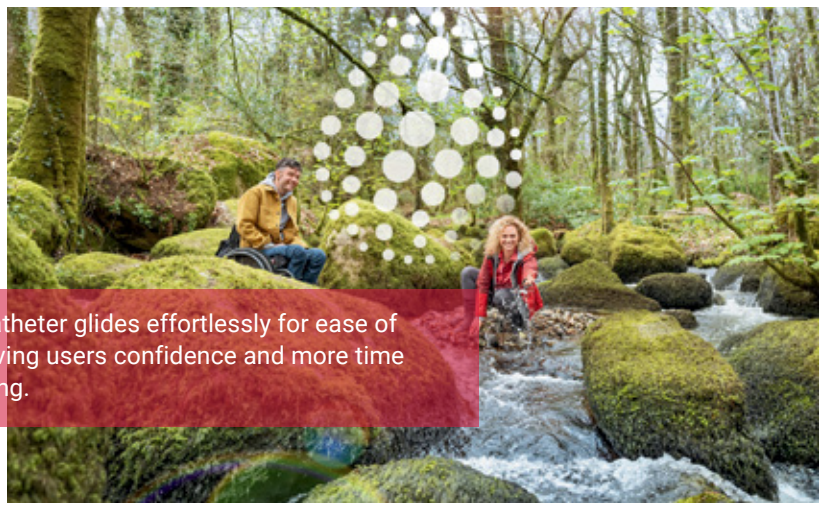

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In pursuit of your element

Finding what drives, excites and leaves you fulfilled can be challenging. The right support and some rebuilding can help

In the vibrant chapters of youth, life is often measured by moments of pure, unadulterated alignment. As a teenager and a young man just stepping into the world, I frequently used the phrase, “I’m in my element”. It was my personal shorthand for those fleeting, exhilarating spaces where excitement met comfort, and where confidence collided with the unusual or the helpful. To be in one’s element is to feel entirely at home in your own skin, fully charged by the circumstances around you.

Then, at twenty-three, the trajectory of my life altered in an instant. A diving accident resulted in a broken neck and despite the fierce, hopeful dreams of walking that carried me through rehabilitation, the reality of quadriplegia became my permanent landscape. In the quiet aftermath of that shift, a persistent question echoed: Would I ever find that feeling again? The search for my element became a quiet but desperate pursuit for a version of myself that I feared had been left behind on the shoreline.

Reclaiming that sense of purpose required a systematic dismantling of my reality, beginning with the fundamental question of how to move forward. The first breakthrough came when I chose to leave the blame of the accident behind. Recognising that forward was the only viable direction, I began searching for my “what” which was a means to sustain myself financially and reintegrate into society as an active contributor.

I turned to serial entrepreneurship, aiming for the highest degree of independence possible. To fuel this new path, I had to master the mechanics of my physical limitations. I learned to speed-read, mastered voice-activated software and adapted to drive a vehicle again.

Yet, as the businesses grew, independence returned and a steady routine established itself under the watchful care of an incredible support system and family, an emptiness remained. I was moving, but I wasn’t entirely fulfilled. I realised that achieving independence was only a prerequisite. I still lacked a definitive “why”.

That deeper purpose finally crystallised when I chose to step away from my commercial ventures and immerse myself in the disability sector, eventually taking the helm as the Chief Executive Officer of the QuadPara Association of South Africa (QASA). It was within the arena of systemic advocacy and lobbying that the old, familiar spark returned.

Championing the rights of others, fighting to transform the South African landscape into an accessible environment and striving to guarantee equal opportunities for persons with disabilities became a gruelling, decades-long endeavour. Yet, throughout that long slog, a profound shift occurred. Amidst the challenges of driving national change, I realised the search was over. I was, undeniably, back “in my element”.

Ultimately, the element is not a place you lose permanently to tragedy. It is something you rediscover through purpose, persistence and service to others. For me, it took many years to find it again, but when I did, I realised it had never really disappeared. It was simply waiting to be rebuilt. For quadriplegics and paraplegics seeking their own path toward independence and purpose, organisations like QASA exist precisely to bridge that gap. As proven change-makers, they offer the resources, projects and coaching necessary to help individuals reinvest in themselves. Ultimately, the element is a state of being you build toward, one deliberate step at a time. R

Ari Seirlis is the former CEO of the QuadPara Association of South Africa and now serves as the Treasurer of QASA. He is also, presently, a member of the Presidential Working Group on Disability. He is a wheelchair user and disability activist. Ari has recently published his biography, titled *Wheels of Fire*.

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Lifetime Achievement Award honours disability rights champion Ari Seirlis

The South African Disability Alliance (SADA) honoured Ari Seirlis with its prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award at a Gala Dinner held in Johannesburg on 5 June 2026. This distinguished recognition celebrates more than 30 years of tireless advocacy, activism and leadership in advancing the rights, inclusion and dignity of persons with disabilities across South Africa.

Ari's contribution to the disability sector has been both profound and transformative. During his 25-year tenure as Chief Executive Officer of the QuadPara Association of South Africa (QASA), he played a pivotal role in building the organisation into one of the country's most sustainable and respected non-profit organisations.

Through unwavering determination, civil courage and principled leadership, he has consistently championed the rights of persons with disabilities and driven meaningful social change.

Today, Ari continues to serve the disability sector as a member of the QASA Board and as an advisor to the President through the Presidential Working Group on Disability, where his expertise and advocacy continue to influence national policy and advance disability inclusion.

The list of Ari Seirlis's achievements is extensive and far-reaching. His decades of activism, leadership and advocacy have left an indelible mark on South Africa's disability rights movement and have improved the lives of countless individuals.

We are immensely proud to congratulate our own Upfront columnist, Ari Seirlis, on this well-deserved honour. This Lifetime Achievement Award stands as a testament to a remarkable legacy of service, courage and impact. May his voice continue to inspire, his leadership continue to guide and his activism continue to shape a more inclusive future for all. R

Power of parental love

The Cottle family embodies the true wonder of parental love as they continue to advocate and push for better access and opportunities for their son, Elijah

One, single week. That is all it took for the Cottle family's lives to be turned upside down. A mere meagre week for Elijah Cottle to receive a life-changing diagnosis. He was a healthy, happy and active toddler. When he started school, he was prone to falling very ill even with harmless viruses. At first, this didn't raise any concern.

"He started school at a young age. I think he was just under 18 months," shares Dino Cottle, Elijah's father. "When he started school, it was virus after virus after virus. We were sort of ready for that because we knew he was going to be around other kids with germs."

But then, Elijah fell severely ill with Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). While common and mild in adults, RSV can lead to bronchiolitis and pneumonia in young children. After that, the family took Elijah's sick spells very seriously.

On Friday, 29 July 2022, only a few days before Elijah's third birthday, his mother, Courtney Cottle, took him to the hospital with a persistent cough. He was held overnight for observation. When it looked like he was recovering, he was discharged.

However, that Sunday, Elijah was walking strangely. He refused to put weight on his right leg. Back at the hospital, he was diagnosed with synovitis and sent home with anti-inflammatories and pain killers. There was no improvement. In fact, he got worse.

By Tuesday, Elijah wasn't walking at all and in the early hours of Wednesday morning, his fever spiked. He was rushed to the Vincent Pallotti emergency room. When the doctors scanned for synovitis, there was no evidence of it. So, the hunt for the cause started. It was a race against time as the paralysis spread.

It is every parent's worst nightmare. Your child is deadly sick. Yet no one, not even the experts, could tell you what was wrong.

"You don't know what's going on. You've got a three-year-old who celebrated his birthday

in hospital and can't use his legs. You've got another baby at home. It was very hectic," Dino shares.

Courtney adds: "It was just over a week, and no one could give us an actual diagnosis. We didn't quite understand or know what to prepare for. From the morning to the evening, the goal post just kept changing."

By the Wednesday afternoon, a paediatric neurologist Dr Sherika Raga was called in. She could narrow it down to two potential causes, but for a definitive diagnosis, they needed to do an MRI with Elijah fully sedated. So, Elijah was transferred to Chris Barnard at two in the morning on Thursday.

The family was encouraged to go home, to rest, but Dino refused. He slept on the hospital floor to stay with his son. This moment would become the birth of Elijah's social media journey. Dino's first post was a love letter from father to son; a promise to stay by his side. Later, the page would grow to inform, educate, advocate and encourage others.

Of the decision to stay over, Dino shares: "It's just what you would do as a parent. You would sleep on the floor for your kid."

While the lack of a diagnosis and the pace at which Elijah's health was declining was a true horror, Dino and Courtney battled with their inability to communicate with their son who was so very young. Dino shares: "Elijah started speaking very late. You're trying to ask your son what's wrong and he can't even explain it."

At Chris Barnard, Elijah was prepared and sedated, a terrifying experience for a parent. Dino recalls seeing his three-year-old son unconscious and connected to all the machinery: "I think seeing him with all the tubes and the pipes just broke me."

LIFE-CHANGING DIAGNOSIS

On 4 August 2022, less than a week after falling ill, Elijah was diagnosed with Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM), a rare neurological condition that attacks the spinal cord to cause sudden weakness. About one person in every million is affected. The majority are children. The severity and lasting impact of the condition depends on the individual. There is no cure, and the symptoms need to be managed. Less than 10 percent of people with AFM recover completely.

MAIN PHOTO: Elijah Cottle today.
ABOVE LEFT: Elijah as a happy, healthy, active toddler before he fell ill.
ABOVE RIGHT: Elijah while in hospital after being diagnosed with Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM).

At the initial diagnosis, Elijah's future was uncertain. Partially because the condition differs from person to person, but mostly because it is so rare. The medical staff were learning about the disease with the Cottle family, which made any predictions difficult.

"He was knocking on death's door at that point. The paralysis had moved up to his diaphragm," Courtney recalls. "His lungs kept filling up with mucus. They had to keep taking him into surgery to suck out all the mucus because it wasn't draining on its own. Essentially, he was drowning. It was a touch and go."

Slowly, Elijah started to recover a bit. There was some relief that he wouldn't die, but his future was still uncertain. The doctors predicted that Elijah would have to be hospitalised for eight months and require a ventilator for the rest of his life.

"It's very difficult when you don't have any experience with someone who's paralysed. Your mind is quite narrow on what paralysis means," Courtney shares.

"There's the knock-on effect with everything else from your colon to your bladder to your lungs to circulation to muscle deterioration. Okay, he's not going to die, but he's going to go home with a home ventilator. He's going to be on that for life. You're now having to learn how to clean out a tracheostomy, change it every day, monitor a machine," she reflects.

SMALL WINS

From Elijah's initial diagnosis, the Cottles have been counting their small wins. The first was that the family was so quick to bring Elijah in when he started getting worse.

"When we went into hospital and checked him, they said that if we had kept him at home that night, he would have died in his sleep. So, that is a win, the first win," Courtney shares.

The second win would come a week before Elijah was discharged. He recovered much sooner than expected and could go home after only six weeks. More good news awaited the family.

"There were talks of him being sent home with a home ventilator. We applied for it, and it was approved. Everything was done. Then a week before he got discharged, we met with a nurse who was going to teach us how to clean everything," Dino shares. "She told us that Elijah's lungs had healed completely, and he won't need the ventilator. We take that as a win. Every small thing we take as a massive win."

There would be many more wins for the family born from their determination to give Elijah the best possible chance of walking again … and they were going to try everything.

PERSISTENT PURSUIT

While researching the condition, Dino came across a plastic surgeon who performed nerve transfer surgeries on children with AFM. Dr Amy Moore has successfully restored some function for these children. The challenge? She was based in Columbus, Ohio. In the United States (US).

ABOVE: (From the back left) Dino, Courtney, Elijah and Isaiah (front) Cottle.

Dino started reaching out. He phoned. He sent e-mail after e-mail. He reached out on Instagram, Facebook and even started an X (formerly Twitter) account to get in touch. For three months, he kept trying.

"I thank my persistent sales nature," Dino shares. His efforts paid off when Dr Moore set up an online consultation. That was the third big win.

The next win came when Elijah qualified for the surgery. It was imperative that there was still some nerve function in his lower body for Dr Moore to transfer nerves. Elijah had retained sensation in his legs and complete functionality of his right foot. This is where they would take the nerves.

Qualifying for the surgery turned out to be the easiest part. Affording the surgery was the true battle. The initial bill for the surgery was US$ 64 000, roughly R1 million today. To add further pressure, the family was on the clock.

The surgery had to take place within a year of the initial diagnosis. They had already lost many months trying to contact Dr Moore.

The fifth big win during this time came when the hospital revised the original quote. They called it a clerical error; the Cottles called it a miracle. The new quote was roughly US$ 20 000 (roughly R330 000 today). It was still an enormous task, but more manageable. The cost of the operation was crowdfunded while all the additional costs like travel and accommodation was covered by the family. Elijah was going to get his surgery.

NERVES OF STEEL

In June of 2023, almost an entire year after his diagnosis, Elijah was due for his nerve transfer surgery. Dino had travelled to Ohio with his son while Courtney stayed home with Elijah's younger brother, Isaiah.

Dr Moore moved the nerves from Elijah's foot to his glutes and quads. The surgery was a success. Now, when Elijah tells his brain to move his toes, it moves his legs. Dr Moore also removed scar tissue that was blocking the signals from the brain to his lower limb. This also helped greatly to restore some function.

Videos of Elijah pre- and post-transfer truly show the incredible difference the operation made. He has more function in his hands and can now crawl on all fours. The family is hoping that over time, as the nerves regenerate, they will see even more improvement.

Following the surgery, Elijah was encouraged to go for intensive rehabilitation to ensure the best possible recovery. This would mean another six months in America.

"Our visa only allows us six months at a time because we have a tourist visa to the US. But we were going to give this boy the best chance," Dino shares. So, Courtney and Isaiah joined Dino and Elijah in America, and they moved to family in Texas where Elijah received the best possible rehabilitation.

The sacrifices and hard work were all to give Elijah the best chance of success … but the fight was far from over. The next big obstacle was the endless advocacy that comes with disability.

ABOVE: There is a stark difference between Elijah's mobility before (left) and after (right) the nerve transfer surgery.

HUNTING FOR INCLUSION

When the Cottle family returned in January 2024, they immediately started searching for schools. As AFM only affected Elijah's mobility, it was recommended that he try and get into a mainstream public school.

This proved to be a great challenge. They contacted nearly 20 schools all of which immediately turned them down. Two were promising. The first was too expensive for the family, while the second finally declined the family after numerous interviews.

"Unfortunately, they made the decision not to go ahead because once he gets to grade three, all the classes are located upstairs," Dino shares. It seemed the school hadn't thought to move the classes for one year.

After nearly a year without any luck, a family friend suggested Pinelands North, which

turned out to be a perfect fit for Elijah. The school had previously welcomed children in wheelchairs and currently had children with autism. More importantly, the school had the correct attitude around inclusion.

“One of their missions or ethos of the school, that I love, is that they don’t make the child around the school; they create the school around the child, which was so beautiful to hear after struggling with all those other schools,” Dino reflects.

By this time, mid-2025, Elijah should have already started school. Despite missing the first half of the year, the school suggested throwing Elijah into the deep end to see how well he does. While he fared pretty well, he has missed a lot more than just six months of school. Since the age of three, Elijah had been in and out of hospitals. He has missed out on many of the fundamentals.

In the end, Elijah was held back to give him the best possible chance to succeed in his schooling. While a difficult choice, the family is just happy to have Elijah in school and socialising with his peers.

“Seeing him interact with the kids, it’s beautiful as a parent. It’s inclusion. They don’t leave him out, which is beautiful to see. He’s actually made solid friendships for the first time. All he knew from the age of three was hospitals, doctors, physiotherapists and routine,” Dino reflects.

“They learned in such a short space of time that yes, he has a wheelchair, and yes, his situation is a little bit different, but that doesn’t mean he is different. He’s still a six-year-old at the end of the day. He still wants to play. If kids can learn that in such a short space of time, why can’t adults? Why do we lose that the older that we get?” Courtney questions.

The Cottles dream of a world that is much easier for children with disabilities to navigate, starting with better access to mainstream schooling. Dino believes that parents should be able to enrol their children in a school of their choosing, and the school should be responsible for accommodating the child.

ABOVE: Despite the obstacles, Elijah remains a happy child hungry for life.

> **“He’s still a six-year-old at the end of the day. He still wants to play.**

Courtney notes the impact inclusion can have on the greater society. Elijah’s friends will grow into adults who are comfortable with and understand disabilities. They may even become employers who encourage more diverse workforces.

INCLUSIVE PLAY

The Cottles are now on a journey to see the same inclusion in playgrounds. There are very few playgrounds in South Africa with any accessible features for children with disabilities. Even when there are adapted equipment, it feels removed or like an afterthought. Especially, when compared to the inclusive playgrounds that the Cottles visited in the US. This mission became

particularly important as Elijah's brother grew into an active, playful child.

"Elijah loves Green Point Park, but he can't play on anything. With his brother being so wild, Isaiah run out of the jungle gym and Elijah just sits in his wheelchair at the bottom. It breaks my heart," Dino shares. Any attempt to get Elijah involved has been met with push back from the security at the park.

"We've had arguments with the security. Adults are not allowed on their equipment. I get that is the rule, but my child is paralysed. He wants to come down the slide. He can't reach the top, so I need to carry him up. Now, you're threatening to kick us out. You're making a difficult life even more difficult. You've got this heavy heart all the time. You just want him to play," Courtney shares.

From schools to playgrounds, excluding children with disabilities can harm them. Courtney explains: "My child is not his wheelchair. He's a whole person. He has an identity and being paralysed isn't who he is. It just happens to be something that has happened to him."

"If you're teaching him at this age to limit himself because able-bodied people's minds are closed off, then what kind of world are we going to put him in when he's an adult? If I'm telling him "No" from six years old, how long is it going to take until he stops pushing himself?" she questions. Dino dreams of one day building a fully accessible playground in his son's name. For this, the family needs a lot more support … especially financially.

BATTLING BILLS

Disability comes with an endless need for advocacy, but also endless bills. From wheelchairs that Elijah will outgrow to therapy and medical complications, the bills have been endless for the family.

"It's very expensive. When he was just diagnosed, the medical aid covered all of his physiotherapy. A minimal amount was out of pocket," Courtney shares. "Over the years, it's been just cut and cut and cut. Now, for example, we can only do one therapist who gets covered by medical aid."

ABOVE: (From the left) Elijah and his brother Isaiah.

The family is covering a big portion of Elijah's medical bills out of pocket. They are also covering the salary for the facilitator at the school (a requirement of the school), and the complications that are arising from his condition. Elijah's spine is starting to curve as he favours his stronger, right side. He might need a brace or surgery. The greatest heartbreak for the Cottles is that money is the true obstacle in Elijah's recovery.

"The only thing that's preventing Elijah from having the best chance at walking again is money. I would love to be in a position where I could send him to physiotherapy three days a week. I know there are kids out there who are doing it five days a week," Dino shares.

Courtney echoes his sentiment: "We're in a very unique situation. It's not cerebral palsy, spina bifida or a spinal cord injury where his outcome is definitive. He could walk again. That chance is very much there. We don't know how far he will go in the future. So, the financial issue is directly impacting us."

While both Dino and Courtney are working, their combined income isn't enough to cover all the medical expenses, therapies and two growing boys. They have relied heavily on crowdfunding for support, but this has become a challenge as there is a constant need for more … and they aren't going to deny their son important medical care.

> **We're not going to refuse to take him to the doctor because we can't afford it right now.**

"We're not going to refuse to take him to the doctor because we can't afford it right now. You can rather give me a bill and add interest. I'm going to give him what he needs at that time. We're running fundraisers all the time, but all that money is going directly to the child," she adds. The family isn't able to get ahead of their expenses, or really catch a moment's break, which is a big strain on both Dino and Courtney.

BURYING IT FOR LATER

Over the past four years, the family has faced endless battles with very little time to process. Dino and Courtney had to put their emotions to the side to focus on the financial battles.

"You have to put all your trauma in a little box and throw it in the back of your mind because you've got financial problems to worry about first. You can't even process what's happening to your child because you've got all these other things happening first," Courtney reflects.

While they try and stay positive for Elijah, it is hard, as Dino shares: "It's difficult, especially with the weight of the world on your shoulders. As men, we've been taught from a young age to internalise everything. It's tough because I've got to deal with expectations from work. I have targets to achieve. I have a family to provide for. I have kids that I'm teaching about morals and values. I'm trying to raise gentlemen here."

While Dino and Courtney will continue to fight to provide for Elijah, so that he may never wonder if they could have done more, the family does call on their community for support.

"Advocacy is hard. It's hard to have a job, make enough money, cover all his therapies, take him to school, be a person, be a mom and then advocate on top of that. It shouldn't always just fall onto the parents. It should fall onto the community," she shares.

"Biologically, he's our child, but he is also everyone else's child. We are one nation, one community. We should all be working together for the betterment of everyone. We don't know what his potential is, and what he could offer the world. If you're limiting him, we're also losing out on everything," she adds.

> **Biologically, he's our child, but he is also everyone else's child. We are one nation, one community.**

A LITTLE PUSH

The Cottles aren't waiting for inclusion or accessibility to catch up. They are slowly instilling a resilient mindset in their son by pushing him to give his best. Their motto: Practice makes progress.

For Dino, it is important to encourage Elijah to always give his all, even if that is just 20 minutes. Whether through encouragement or through example, it is clear that Elijah has adopted his parent's resilience.

He continues to work hard and inspire others. You can follow along with Elijah's story on Facebook or Instagram. R

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End-of-life care at home

Palliative care is highly individualised, but these general guidelines can help you care for your loved one, and survive this challenging time

Caring for a person with a mobility impairment at home is challenging at the best of times. Palliative, end-of-life care, is even more challenging. For some the end comes abruptly, even unexpectedly, and may be a blessing in disguise. For many, the process is prolonged.

There are phases of curative care and the restoration of bodily functions, such as maintaining renal or cardiac function. As the heart, lungs and kidneys begin to fail, the focus changes to palliative support; to make the person as comfortable as possible while waiting for the end.

This more often (and preferably) takes place at home, in the care of a loved one who took up the role of caregiver with or without support from family and friends. For such self-appointed caregivers, this is a time of intense emotional heartache, stress, physical challenges and sleep-disturbed nights, which leaves the caregiver washed out and drained.

For such caregivers, this is usually a first exposure to the uncertainty of "am I doing the right thing?", which also takes its toll.

The process of terminal care is highly individualised, and there is no "one-size-fits-all" protocol for caring. However, here are a few general guidelines in caring for the patient and surviving as the carer.

QUALITY-OF-LIFE FOCUSED

The critical role is to keep the patient safe and well cared for at home to prevent avoidable emergency department visits and hospitalisation.

If a situation arises where a visit to a doctor or an emergency department is considered,

family carers should ask themselves three questions: "Will the outcome improve the quality of the patient's remaining life?"; "Will the outcome merely prolong the remaining life (and suffering) of the patient?"; and "Will the outcome of the visit actually change the course of events?".

The focus of the answers to these questions should be: "What course of action will maintain or enhance the quality of the patient's present life best?".

> **What course of action will maintain or enhance the quality of life best?**

Enhancing quality of life usually revolves around pain management and comfortable breathing, but infections such as urinary tract infections and pneumonia must also be considered.

A phone call to your general practitioner (GP) for advice is a good first consideration. There are also GPs who specialise in frail and terminal care who do home visits.

Many medical aids fund home nursing care in lieu of hospital care. They can all be sources of advice in decision making.

Contracting a reputable caregiver company to take care of the physical aspects of caring will relieve much of the burden for the family carer, leaving them to focus on the loving and empathy needs of the terminal patient.

Professional carers know how to manage bladder and bowel needs, how to assist with fluid and food intake and how to turn the patient in bed. All the things that a novice family carer struggles with.

TIPS FOR EMOTIONAL CARE

Chat to the patient about everyday events, the doings of family, friends and children. Be yourself, even if it is hard. Steer clear of niceties and platitudes, they are usually not appreciated. Pastoral care can be of great comfort to both the patient and the carer.

When the patient becomes agitated, music is a great comforter. Select music that the patient loves and play it softly.

WhatsApp voice notes from family and friends, and particularly from children, are an absolute winner. I have personal experience on how it perks up the emotions of very frail persons in the end stage of life.

Avoid "Ag shame, you poor thing" messages. Keep it pleasant, chatty and lively. It may illicit a few tears, but overall, it is uplifting. If need be, just sit with the patient, hold their hand and say nothing. Your presence is their comfort.

MAINTAINING YOUR SANITY

Terminal care of a loved one is emotionally draining. There are constant concerns and dreaming up of horror scenarios: "Am I doing the right thing?"; "Am I doing enough?"; "What will I do if…".

> **Terminal care of a loved one is emotionally draining.**

Then there is the physical tiredness, especially if you are also performing physical tasks such as body-washing, dressing, toilet routines and turning in bed.

There are financial concerns. Caring comes with expenses and affordability becomes an issue. Enfolding all of this is the immense sorrow and heartache of impending loss…

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

So, what to do to maintain your sanity and keep

up your strength? As a point of departure, the loved-one carers must realise their own limits.

There is no point in grinding yourself into a funk of self-enforced resilience and perseverance. If you crash, you take your loved one with you.

You need to sit down, preferably with a trusted, uninvolved person to identify challenges and concerns. Seek viable, lasting solutions and draw up a schedule of tasks and support functions that includes me-time as well. A structured approach places you in charge.

GET HELP

Secondly, seek help. All too often family members are happy to leave it to those who took it upon themselves to care. Rope other family members in to give you me-time. They need not be equally involved but find ways in which they can give you a break.

> **“**
>
> **Rope other family members in to give you me-time.**

If it is affordable, contract professional carers to assist with the required physical aspects of care. If your loved one is on a medical aid and is approaching the end, consider contracting a home-care professional nursing agency. Most medical aids will cover home nursing for a limited period.

POWER OF ATTORNEY

Thirdly, if the loved one in your care is financially secure, consider obtaining power of attorney to access the loved one’s funds to cover medical and other caring expenses.

For your own security, maintain strict records of all expenses incurred; what was funded by your loved one and by yourself.

PART OF THE TEAM

Lastly, become part of the team. Professional carers and nursing staff often see loved-one carers as “necessary nuisances”.

Prove your value in the emotional support you provide to your loved one and gain their respect. After all, you contracted their services on behalf of your loved one…

AFTER THE END…

Now you find yourself in an emotional turmoil. Ten minutes ago, at the break of dawn, your loved one started shuddering and gasping. Then became still. You felt for a pulse and there was none. It is over. Your loved one has passed away.

You cry out your anguish and grief, but at the same time, you feel a great burden rolling off your shoulders. You are finally free of your captivity. All that remains are the formalities of death and funeral arrangements. Your conflicting emotions are a rollercoaster.

You pace up and down, aimlessly, crying for your loss but with a sense of great relief. The suffering is over. You feel the urge to tell someone and rush over to a neighbour-friend.

She comes to the door bleary-eyed and half asleep. She immediately realises what happened and holds you in her arms without a word. She lets you talk and reminisce.

Slowly you settle down over a cup of coffee. Over the next few days, you function with a sense of calm; heartsore but calm.

But be aware. There may arise a flood of grief at any time. Unexpected. Out of the blue. Don’t be frightened. Let it flow. It is part of healing. R

George Louw qualified as a medical doctor, but, due to a progressing spastic paralysis, chose a career in health administration. The column is named after Ida Hlongwa, who worked as caregiver for Ari Seirlis for 20 years. Her charm, smile, commitment, quality care and sacrifice set the bar incredibly high for the caregiving fraternity.

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Challenges of booking through a third party

While convenient, booking through a third-party could leave you with the wrong room or no room at all

Booking accommodation through a third party, like Booking.com, is convenient, but can pose some challenges or lead to miscommunication. Even as a seasoned traveller, I still have my fair share of bad experiences.

CANCELLING CHALLENGES

While visiting family overseas, I needed a hotel booking near their home. I booked a cheap and cheerful basic accommodation on Booking.com as I was only going to use it for sleeping. In South Africa, Booking.com requests your credit card details even if the reservation allows you to cancel at no charge up to a specific date.

My travel plans changed so I cancelled the reservation via Booking.com at least 10 days before the due date. I received a response from Booking.com that the booking was cancelled. I didn't think about it again.

That is until I checked my credit card statement a couple months later and found that the property had taken off the full amount which was R27 300!

IN PURSUIT

I immediately contacted my bank and asked for them to reverse the payment. They told me to contact the property which I did via e-mail. No response!

After many attempts to contact them, I asked my family to try the local number. My family was able to get in touch with them and arrange a meeting in-site with the manager.

The hotel was apologetic and acknowledged that they had taken the money but were not forthcoming as to why they had not reversed the payment. They agreed to pay a set sum over the next six weeks into my family's account as sending money back to South Africa is too difficult with the Foreign Exchange laws.

A SCATHING REVIEW

They paid three instalments and then nothing. Both my family and I have attempted to get

hold of them many times both via WhatsApp and e-mail. To date, there has been no response.

I looked at the global reviews for this establishment only to find that they are regularly doing this to their guests. I have written reviews to Booking.com and Tripadvisor. I have sent a complaint to the local municipal office on their tourist complaint line.

> **I looked at the globl reviews ... to find that they are regularly going this to their guests.**

I contacted Booking.com directly to ask why they still promote this establishment with all the negative issues, but am yet to get a response. I will not give up! This is not a small sum of money!

DOUBLE BOOKED

While visiting Madrid, I booked a accessible room for one night. I received confirmation in writing through Booking.com. However, on arrival (around midnight), I was told that the accessible room was not available!

As it was only for one night, I had to accept a standard room. This meant that I had to access the bed from the bottom as there wasn't sufficient space on the sides.

I couldn't access the toilet within the bathroom in the room. I had to wash in the basin and go down to the lobby to make use of the accessible toilet!

NOT A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

In a recent issue of the regular newsletter, WheelchairTravel.org, by another seasoned traveller John Morris, he wrote on accessible hotels and shared a similar experience. It just goes to show that this matter is not singular!

He shares how he booked an accessible hotel room through a major credit card company's travel portal only to arrive and learn the room is not available! Even with a confirmation e-mail, he was given the wrong room.

He shares: "It didn't matter to the hotel, because my reservation was not with them, but with the third-party booking site". John also mentions hotels overselling, which then leaves third-party booked guests "at the back of the line".

Booking through a third-party makes it very challenging to hold hotels accountable for bookings, or to report an issue when there is a miscommunication.

AVOIDING THIS ISSUE

Be careful when making bookings through third-party sights! My suggestion is to still contact the hotel directly when booking through a third party to confirm your specific needs.

Similarly, if you cancel your accommodation through a third party, send a courtesy e-mail to the hotel to notify them as well.

This just further eliminates any opportunities for a misunderstanding and allows you to document every step.

A record of your booking and cancellation makes it a lot easier to argue your case if a misunderstanding arises.

Happy travels! R

Mandy Latimore is a consultant in the disability sector in the fields of travel and access.

Get in touch: mandy@noveltravel.co.za

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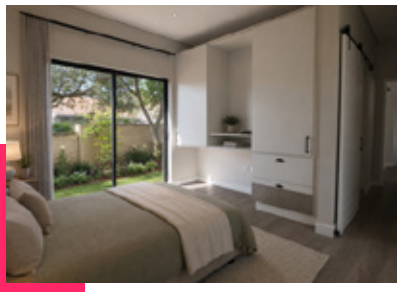

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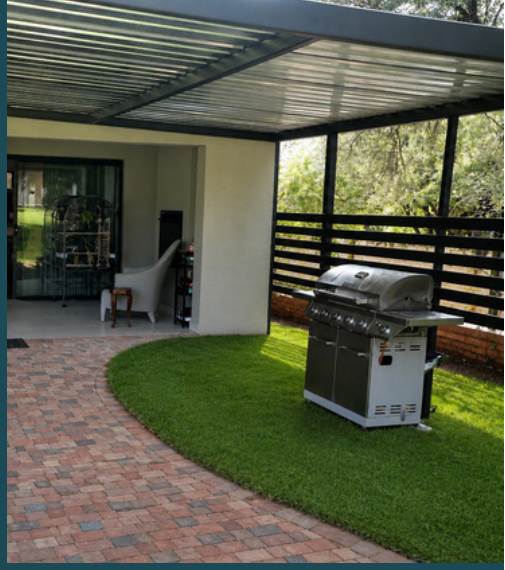

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Transforming ideas into assistive technology in Africa

Shonaquip Social Enterprise with its Centre for Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship and Rural Assistive Devices Testing Laboratory is turning ideas into assistive technology

In many parts of Africa, assistive devices arrive with good intentions but limited longevity. A wheelchair designed for smooth pavements and controlled urban environments may struggle on gravel roads, uneven terrain, long travelling distances and in communities where repair parts are difficult to source. When equipment fails, the impact extends far beyond mobility. It can interrupt education, employment, healthcare access and everyday independence.

For decades, much of the assistive technology used across the continent has been imported, often designed for conditions very different from those in which it will ultimately be used. According to Dean Mubaiwa, who heads the Centre for Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIIE) at Shonaquip Social Enterprise (ShonaquipSE), approximately 90 percent of assistive and medical devices used in Africa are imported, with South Africa still heavily dependent on devices manufactured elsewhere.

MAIN PHOTO: Image courtesy of Door of Hope & Hannah Thompson.

Yet alongside these challenges, a quieter shift has been taking shape. Across the continent, local innovators, clinicians, engineers and entrepreneurs are beginning to rethink assistive technology through an African lens, creating solutions rooted not in theory, but in lived realities. It is within this movement that ShonaquipSE has become one of the most recognised voices in inclusive innovation.

FROM GARAGE TO CONTINENTAL IMPACT

Founded in 1992 by Shona McDonald, the organisation began in a small garage workshop with a deeply personal purpose as Shona struggled to find appropriate assistive equipment for her daughter Shelly, who was born with cerebral palsy. What emerged over time was far more than a manufacturing business.

Today, ShonaquipSE has grown into a social enterprise working across mobility support, inclusive education, parent support networks, rural transport solutions and innovation development. Its work reaches beyond products and into the systems that allow people with disabilities to participate more fully in society.

At the heart of the organisation is a simple but often overlooked understanding: Assistive technology is never only about the device itself. A wheelchair may be expertly engineered, but if it cannot be correctly fitted, repaired locally, adapted over time or supported within the realities of the community it serves, its impact is often short lived. Sustainability, serviceability and context matter just as much as design.

ABOVE: The Pad Perch by Jenny Webster was developed and launched through the Shonaquip Centre for Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

SPACE FOR AFRICAN INNOVATION

This thinking led to the establishment of the Centre for Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIIE) in 2025, a space designed to support innovators developing assistive technologies for low resource settings. It helps transform ideas into market ready products by guiding innovators through design, prototyping, testing, manufacturing readiness and commercialisation.

More importantly, it provides something that remains rare within the disability innovation space, which is meaningful support for founders with lived experience of disability themselves. Many innovators have practical solutions born from navigating everyday barriers, yet few have access to the technical support, testing facilities or manufacturing pathways needed to bring those ideas to market. The CIIE exists to help close that gap.

Since opening, the Centre has already received strong interest from innovators across South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia, reflecting a growing demand for locally grounded innovation support across the continent.

ROOTED IN LIVED EXPERIENCE

One of the first products supported through the CIIE is the Pad Perch, developed by innovator Jenny Webster. With a degenerative eye condition, Jenny began creating makeshift solutions to help improve visibility, function and comfort while working on detailed tasks. What started as a personal adaptation eventually evolved into an assistive low-vision device designed to support alignment, control and independence during everyday activities such as reading, writing and handcraft.

When she approached ShonaquipSE, the organisation chose not to acquire the concept, but instead encouraged her to retain ownership of the product while using the support structures of the CIIE to refine, test and manufacture the first production run. The result is a product that has already entered the market and begun expanding into Kenya, demonstrating what becomes possible when innovation is supported rather than absorbed.

Stories like Jenny's reflect a broader shift taking place within African disability innovation, one where people with lived experience are no longer seen only as end users, but as designers, founders and problem solvers shaping the future of the sector itself.

TESTING FOR REAL WORLD CONDITIONS

Alongside the CIIE, ShonaquipSE has also established the Rural Assistive Devices

Testing Laboratory, known as the RAD Lab, which focuses on evaluating assistive technologies within the realities of rural and resource constrained environments. Traditional international testing standards remain important, but many were developed around conditions that differ significantly from those experienced across large parts of Africa. Rough terrain, dust exposure, long distance travel and limited repair infrastructure all place different pressures on equipment.

The RAD Lab is helping to bridge this gap by combining international testing frameworks with practical, field-based evaluation that reflects how devices are actually used in everyday life. The goal is to challenge global standards by strengthening them through locally generated empirical evidence and contextually relevant testing. In doing so, the test lab contributes to a wider conversation about what truly inclusive and appropriate design looks like across different regions, cultures and realities of the world.

RECOGNITION REFLECTING MOMENTUM

ShonaquipSE was included in the *Forbes* Accessibility 200 list, which recognises organisations around the world driving meaningful progress in accessibility and disability inclusion. For the team, the recognition arrived during a significant period of growth as the CIIE continues to expand its work and partnerships across the continent. The achievement also reflects something larger than a single organisation. It signals growing international recognition that some of the most important innovation in assistive technology is emerging from communities that have long been expected only to receive solutions, rather than lead them.

ShonaquipSE has built an ecosystem of possibility, one that supports locally driven innovation, strengthens manufacturing capacity, creates pathways for entrepreneurs with disabilities and reimagines how assistive technology can be designed for the environments in which it is actually used.

ABOVE: The Rural Assistive Devices (RAD) testing lab offers a range of tests to determine if your device meets international standards.

CHANGING WHAT IS POSSIBLE

As the demand for accessible, locally relevant innovation continues to grow across Africa, spaces such as the CIIE and the RAD Lab become increasingly important for creating pathways through which African innovators can shape the future of assistive technology on their own terms.

For innovators, organisations or partners interested in collaborating with the CIIE or accessing the RAD Testing Lab, ShonaquipSE can be contacted at 021 797 8239 or Dean@ShonaquipSE.org.za. More information can also be found at www.radtestlab.com.

Shonaquip Social Enterprise (SSE) builds inclusive ecosystems where people with disabilities and their families can live full lives. SSE provide a range of unique, locally designed and manufactured pediatric assistive device suitable for intermediate and advanced seating requirements, as well as training and outreach programmes that support disability awareness, inclusive education and employment, disability advocacy and empowerment. **Get in touch: info@shonaquipse.org.za**

Introducing our new
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Accelerating MedTech Innovation in Africa

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RURAL ASSISTIVE DEVICES TEST LABORATORY

Moving through the grief of a spinal cord injury

Grief is a normal response after a spinal cord injury. Neuropsychologist Taryn Fish explains what to expect and how to approach emotional recovery

A spinal cord injury affects far more than the body. Understanding the emotional experience of grief and adjustment can help individuals and families navigate life after an injury with greater clarity and compassion.

WHEN LIFE CHANGES UNEXPECTEDLY

A spinal cord injury can come as a profound shock. A person may go from being independent to suddenly relying on others for even their most basic needs. It is a life-changing event that often occurs unexpectedly, leaving individuals and families feeling overwhelmed by the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Rehabilitation is understandably primarily focused on physical recovery. This work is essential. As the focus is often directed toward physical rehabilitation, the emotional impact of spinal cord injury can sometimes receive less attention. However, emotional recovery is equally as important.

Emotional adjustment is a vital part of recovery and can significantly influence motivation, relationships, engagement in rehabilitation and overall wellbeing. Adjusting emotionally to such a significant change can be extremely difficult. Central to this process is the experience of grief.

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF

In the early stages, it is common to experience confusion, anger, anxiety, hopelessness, or emotional numbness. Many people feel pressure to “stay strong”, which can leave little space to grieve the life they once knew as well as the future they had imagined.

Grief after a spinal cord injury is not only grief for physical loss. It can include changes in identity, independence, routine, relationships, confidence, future plans and even a sense of self. While the physical loss of function is significant, it is these less visible losses that often contribute most strongly to emotional grief.

LOSS OF INDEPENDENCE
One of the most challenging losses is independence. For adults who have been living independently, the sudden shift to requiring assistance with basic daily activities such as dressing, feeding, toileting or mobility can feel profoundly disorientating.

Closely linked is the loss of privacy. Increased care needs often mean relying on others for intimate aspects of daily life, which can feel like a loss of personal space and autonomy.

LOSS OF IDENTITY
Changes in identity are also common. Following injury, many roles may shift dramatically. Someone who has long been a caregiver (whether to a child, spouse or ageing parent) may suddenly find themselves in the unfamiliar position of needing care.

Similarly, someone who was previously the primary provider for their family may no longer be able to fulfil that role. These shifts can be deeply unsettling and require a redefinition of identity and purpose.

LOSS OF RELATIONSHIPS
Relationships may also be affected. For couples, it can be difficult to preserve a sense of partnership when one person takes on caregiving responsibilities.

Friendships can also become harder to maintain. Social activities may require adaptation, and some people may feel unsure how to respond or how to stay involved. These changes can leave individuals feeling isolated and grieving the loss of valued relationships.

GRIEVING THE IMAGINED FUTURE
People are often grieving not only what has been lost, but also what they had hoped would be. Most of us carry expectations and dreams about how life will unfold.

A spinal cord injury can disrupt these in profound ways, altering anticipated futures, relationships, careers, hobbies and long-held hopes.

Even possibilities that remain achievable may look different than originally imagined. In this sense, people may grieve not only what was, but also what they hoped life would become.

WRESTLING WITH ADJUSTMENT
There are many different kinds of losses following spinal cord injury, and no one right way to grieve. Feelings of denial, anger, sadness, despair, or difficulty accepting changed abilities are all understandable and common responses.

> **“Adjustment after a spinal cord injury is rarely straightforward.**

Adjustment after a spinal cord injury is rarely straightforward. Some people struggle with grief because they feel guilty for experiencing it. They may feel pressure to remain positive, be resilient or focus only on the silver linings.

Thoughts such as “I should just be grateful to be alive” or comparisons with others whose circumstances appear worse can make it difficult to acknowledge personal suffering.

While gratitude can be helpful, avoiding grief does not make it disappear. Feelings of sadness and loss are natural responses to a significant life change. For some, acknowledging grief can feel overwhelming or even frightening.

Yet, it is often through recognising and expressing grief, particularly with the support of others, that these emotions become less intense and more manageable over time.

NON-LINEAR ADJUSTMENT
Grief doesn’t follow a linear path. People often move in and out of different emotional states, sometimes revisiting emotions they thought had settled.

Difficult emotions may resurface in response to reminders of loss, such as leaving rehabilitation, encountering inaccessible environments, health setbacks, or seeing peers progress differently. These fluctuations are not signs of failure in emotional recovery. Rather, they are a normal part of the adjustment process.

ACCEPTANCE IS PERSISTING

Acceptance is also sometimes misunderstood. Acceptance does not mean liking what has happened, giving up or no longer experiencing sadness. Rather, it involves gradually acknowledging the reality of injury while learning how to live meaningfully alongside it.

Grief and adjustment are not signs of failing to cope. They are often signs of someone actively trying to make sense of profound change. Grief and hope can coexist. It is possible to acknowledge loss while gradually rebuilding meaning, identity, and direction.

WHAT CAN HELP

Although adjustment is complex, certain approaches can make the process more manageable:

- **Make space for grief**: Allow space for grief rather than pushing it away. Emotional expression does not prevent healing; it supports it. Naming feelings such as sadness, anger, fear or disappointment can reduce their intensity over time.
- **Support is importance**: Support from others plays a central role. Being able to talk openly with trusted people, therapists, peers or support groups can reduce isolation and help normalise emotional responses. Many people find comfort in realising they are not alone. It can also help to challenge unhelpful expectations such as the belief that one must remain positive at all times, or that grief reflects a lack of resilience.
- **Small wins and redefining independence**: Recovery is often built through small, meaningful moments that may not always be visible to others. Progress may involve learning a new skill, asking for help, reconnecting socially or simply allowing oneself to laugh again. These “small wins” help rebuild confidence, agency and a sense of possibility.

Over time, many people find that emotional recovery involves learning to live alongside change rather than “moving on” from it. Independence, too, may come to be understood differently; not as doing everything alone, but as finding new ways to exercise choice, autonomy and control.

> **“Emotional recovery involves learning to live alongside change.**

WHEN TO REACH OUT

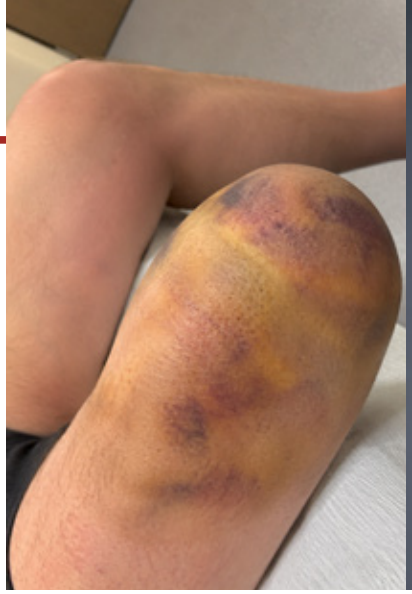
While grief and emotional ups and downs are normal, it is important to recognise when additional support is needed. If feelings of sadness, hopelessness or overwhelm begin to feel unbearable or difficult to manage, it is important to reach out.

Support can come from psychologists, rehabilitation teams, peer support networks, or trusted family members and friends. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness. It is an important and appropriate part of recovery.

With time, support, and space to process both loss and possibility, it is possible to build a life that looks different from what was once imagined, yet is still meaningful, connected, and deeply valued. R

Prosthetic socket comfort matters most

A poorly fitted, uncomfortable socket can greatly impact on quality of life and health



When people think about a prosthetic lower limb, they often focus on the foot, knee or the advanced technology involved, especially if they consult Dr Google. These components are important. However, the most critical part of any prosthesis is often the least visible: the prosthetic socket.

The socket connects the residual limb to the artificial limb. It serves as the interface between the body and the prosthesis. The comfort of the socket can determine whether a person enjoys an active, independent lifestyle or struggles with pain, skin breakdown and the activities of daily living. A comfortable socket allows pressure to distribute evenly across the residual limb. When the fit is correct, walking requires less effort, balance improves, and the risk of skin breakdown is reduced. On the other hand, even a small area of excessive pressure can lead to discomfort, blisters, skin irritation and wounds that prevent the user from wearing their prosthesis. Surgical stump revision may become necessary if the issue persists. The reality is simple. The most advanced prosthetic foot or knee cannot compensate for an uncomfortable socket. Comfort is the foundation of a successful prosthesis.

Socket fit can change over time. Factors such as weight fluctuations, age, muscle changes and atrophy (shrinkage), activity levels, and even the weather can affect the volume and shape of the residual limb. A perfectly fitted socket from a year ago may no longer provide the same level of comfort today. Many of the complications of an uncomfortable socket can be avoided by taking the following steps:

- When fitting a new or first-time prosthesis, an extended test fitting protocol must be followed to iron out pressure spots and volume fluctuations before the final socket is made. This could take a couple of weeks, but the extended time doesn't matter at all, you have a working test prosthesis from day one, just follow a proper fitting protocol.
- The prosthetist should teach the patient how to deal with and adjust the leg at home for comfort and deal with and avoid complications. This sounds simple but remember that there are many solutions for every complication and the more knowledge you have the better.
- The prosthetist should be readily available during this test socket phase because communication is vital.
- Final sockets should be manufactured so that they are adjustable in the near future. Non-adjustable hard final sockets limit problem solving, different solutions and further adjustment.

Socket comfort is not that hard to achieve. Take the time to do it properly! If a little love, time and care are invested in the process, it can work almost every time. R

Heinrich Grimsehl is a prosthetist in private practice and a member of the South African Orthotic and Prosthetic Association (SAOPA).

Get in touch: info@hgprosthetics.co.za

The Miracle Underground

Progress isn't always visible and some of the most important growth can happen underground

Have you ever felt like everyone else is moving forward while you are standing still? You know the feeling. Someone gets the promotion. Somebody starts a successful business. Another friend buys a new house. Someone else seems to have life all figured out.

Meanwhile, you are still trying to remember why you walked into the kitchen in the first place. At my age, that happens more often than I care to admit!

I recently came across a story about a Fern and a Bamboo Tree, and it got me thinking.

The story goes that a gardener planted a Fern and a Bamboo seed at exactly the same time. He watered them both faithfully and cared for them equally.

Within a few weeks the Fern burst through the soil. Bright green leaves appeared almost overnight. It seemed to grow bigger and stronger every day. The gardener could see progress and felt encouraged.

The Bamboo, however, appeared to be on a completely different programme. Nothing happened. Weeks passed … nothing. Months passed … still nothing.

The Fern continued growing and showing off its beautiful leaves while the Bamboo stubbornly refused to make an appearance. After a year there was still no sign of life above the ground.

The gardener could easily have concluded that the Bamboo had failed. After all, if something is growing surely you should be able to see it? Yet, beneath the surface a miracle was taking place.

The Bamboo was busy developing an extensive root system. It was building strength, stability and resilience underground. The growth was real, but it was invisible. Then, after years of patient preparation, the Bamboo finally broke through the surface.

And when it did, it didn't grow a few centimetres here and there. It shot upwards at an astonishing rate, eventually towering above the Fern. The question is, when did

the Bamboo actually grow? Was it during those dramatic months when everyone could see it? Or was it during the years when nobody could?

I suspect many of us are Bamboo Trees. Particularly those of us who have faced disability, illness, unemployment, loss, heartbreak or life's unexpected detours. Life has a habit of convincing us that visible progress is the only progress that matters.

We live in a world of highlights. Social media is full of smiling faces, perfect holidays and overnight successes. What we don't see are the years of disappointment, rejection, hard work and perseverance behind the photograph.

It's a bit like watching the finish of a marathon and assuming the runner only started five minutes ago.

As a life coach, I often speak to people who feel frustrated because they believe they are not making progress. They say things like "I'm still unemployed"; "My business isn't growing"; "I haven't achieved my goal"; "I don't seem to be getting anywhere".

Yet, when we dig a little deeper, a very different picture emerges. They have learned new skills. They have become more resilient. They have gained confidence. They have developed wisdom. They have survived challenges that would have defeated the person they used to be.

In other words, roots are growing. Sometimes life is not delaying us. Sometimes life is preparing us. I know this from personal experience.

I read a saying by Jennifer L. Armentrout that goes: "Sometimes when things are falling apart, they may actually be falling into place."

Following my injury there were many days when progress felt painfully slow. While others appeared to be racing ahead, I often felt as if I was parked on the side of the road with my hazard lights flashing.

Looking back now, I can see that some of my most important growth happened during those difficult years.

Patience grew. Compassion grew. Gratitude grew. Purpose grew. The roots were spreading long before anything was visible above the surface. Isn't that true for all of us?

The mother raising a child with special needs. The student struggling through another year of study. The job seeker sending out application after application. The entrepreneur working from a kitchen table. The person rebuilding their life after loss.

None of them may look successful yet, but roots are growing. The Fern and the Bamboo remind us of a powerful truth.

Do not compare your chapter three to someone else's chapter twenty. Do not assume that because nothing is visible, nothing is happening. Do not mistake preparation for failure.

If you are doing the work, learning the lessons, showing up every day and refusing to quit, growth is taking place. It may be underground. It may be invisible. It may be slower than you would like, but roots are growing.

One day, when the time is right, people will see the Bamboo. What they won't see are the years spent becoming strong enough to support it. Keep watering your dreams. Keep growing your roots. Your miracle may already be happening underground. R

Len Davey is a qualified life coach. To book a session, contact him via his website: www.theworldwithin.co.za. A free "goal setting" session is offered without any obligation so that you can experience life coaching first hand.

Get in touch: len@theworldwithin.co.za

Gaming matters for people with disabilities

Whether in personal or therapeutic use, gaming can help people with disabilities gain more freedom, confidence and community

Video games are often seen as simply entertainment, but for many people with disabilities, they represent something much deeper. Gaming can provide freedom, connection, personal expression and even therapeutic benefits. Understanding why people with disabilities play games helps developers, accessibility advocates, and communities create more inclusive experiences.

BEYOND PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

One of the most powerful aspects of gaming is the ability to experience things beyond real-world limitations. In virtual worlds, players can run, climb mountains, fly across galaxies, or explore vast landscapes. Games become spaces where physical barriers disappear, and imagination takes over. These experiences can be deeply meaningful and can create a sense of independence and freedom.

REDUCING SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social isolation can be a challenge for some people with disabilities, particularly when physical barriers or health conditions limit opportunities to participate in traditional social activities. Online gaming communities offer a powerful solution.

Multiplayer games allow people to connect, collaborate and compete with others around the world. Players can form friendships, join teams and become part of communities built around shared interests. In many cases, disability becomes less visible in online environments, allowing individuals to interact with others on equal footing.

IDENTITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Video games also offer unique opportunities for identity and self-expression. Through avatar creation and character customisation, players can represent themselves in ways that feel empowering or meaningful.

Some players choose avatars that reflect their real-life identities, while others experiment with entirely different personas. In both cases,

the ability to design a character gives players control over how they are represented in the virtual world. For people who may face stigma or barriers in physical spaces, these digital identities can provide a powerful sense of autonomy and representation.

ACHIEVEMENT, CHALLENGE, PERSONAL GROWTH

Games are built around challenges and goals. Completing difficult levels, solving puzzles and mastering mechanics can create a strong sense of accomplishment. For players with disabilities, these achievements can be especially meaningful. Games provide clear feedback, measurable progress and opportunities to develop new skills.

Whether mastering a strategy game or completing a challenging quest, each success reinforces a sense of capability and achievement. These experiences can build confidence and motivation that extends beyond gaming itself.

GAMING AS THERAPY

Rehabilitation specialists have begun incorporating game-based systems into physical and cognitive therapy programmes. The goal, reward and enjoyment-focus of games transform repetitive rehabilitation exercises into motivating experiences. Interactive games can encourage movement, improve coordination and strengthen cognitive skills while keeping patients engaged.

Occupational therapist Niki Singh recently invited Konke Gamers to her practice to create a tailored gaming experience for her patients. It was an incredible morning, full of learning, engagement and plenty of fun. Every patient who attended has pursued an individual session with Konke Gamers, which highlights the impact of the experience.

FUTURE OF ACCESSIBLE GAMING

As awareness of accessibility continues to grow, the gaming industry is increasingly focusing on inclusive design. Adaptive controllers, customisable interfaces, and accessibility features such as remappable controls, subtitles and visual adjustments are helping more people participate in gaming than ever before.

Konke Gamers is on a mission to ensure South Africans with disabilities have access to all of these incredible innovations. If you'd like Konke Gamers to bring a similar session to your practice, or you'd like to book a personal session, feel free to get in touch with us directly at konkegamers@gmail.com or david@konkegamers.co.za.

MAIN AND ABOVE: Konke Gamers recently did a demonstration with Niki Singh and her patients.

Konke Gamers is a volunteer-driven, non-profit initiative focused on making gaming accessible to people with disabilities. Working with **Able Gamers**, they provide adaptive controllers and specialised, inclusive gaming solutions to break down barriers in the gaming community.

Get in touch: Konkegamers@gmail.com

Preparing for tax season

With the annual tax season upon us, Lammert Stavast takes a look at what you need before submitting a disability tax claim

Every year around July, tax season opens and people start gathering their documents to submit their tax returns. For individuals with disabilities and their families, this process can feel particularly overwhelming. Between medical expenses, therapy costs, assistive devices and specialist care, there are often many receipts and records to keep track of.

The good news is that a little preparation before tax season opens can make the process much easier.

The most important document in any disability tax claim is the ITR-DD form. This is the official form used by SARS to confirm that a person qualifies as having a disability for tax purposes. The form must be completed and signed by a qualified medical practitioner.

It confirms whether the person has a moderate to severe limitation in one of the recognised areas of functioning including physical mobility, vision, hearing, intellectual functioning or mental health.

In most cases the ITR-DD form is valid for 10 years, provided the condition is permanent. If you have submitted one in previous years, it is worth checking whether it is still valid before submitting your next tax return.

The second key step is keeping proper records of medical and disability-related expenses. SARS may ask for supporting documentation, so it is important to retain invoices, receipts and proof of payment for expenses such as:

- Medical aid statements and tax certificates (Request the detailed claims sheet from your medical aid)
- Therapy sessions not covered by the medical aid (for example physiotherapy, occupational therapy or speech therapy)
- Assistive devices such as wheelchairs or communication equipment
- Certain specialised educational expenses
- Home modifications that assist with mobility or accessibility
- Travel to doctors, therapy, etc.

If you claim on behalf of your child, you should also have the following:

- Special needs school fee schedule with a comparative school fee schedule of a public school; and
- Logbook if you are travelling more than 10 kilometres to school.

A helpful tip is to create a simple digital or physical folder where these documents are stored throughout the year. Trying to reconstruct a year's worth of expenses in June or July can be stressful and time-consuming.

> **Create a folder where these documents are stored in the year.**

Another important point is to remember that not all claims are processed automatically. In some cases, SARS may select a return for verification. This simply means they want to see the supporting documents before finalising the assessment. When your records are organised and complete, this process becomes much easier.

Finally, do not wait until the last moment. If you believe you qualify for disability tax relief, start reviewing your documentation now. Confirm that your ITR-DD form is valid and that your medical records are up to date.

Tax season does not need to be a source of anxiety. With the right preparation, it becomes an opportunity to ensure that the financial support built into the tax system actually reaches the families who need it most.

For more information you are more than welcome to contact me at info@yourdisabilitytax.co.za or visit our website www.yourdisabilitytax.co.za. R

Lammert Stavast is a qualified chartered accountant, tax practitioner and founder of YourDisabilityTax, which assists persons with disabilities or families with their disability tax rebate claims and disputes to the maximum refund within the legal framework.

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Designing AI solutions for Africa

With unreliable internet and power, rural terrains and unique speaking patterns, Africa would need its own unique AI solutions

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer limited to chatbots, automated writing tools or online assistants. It is being built into wheelchairs, computer interfaces and other physical devices. These systems can understand their surroundings, respond to the user's movements and help people with severe physical disabilities regain greater control. For people with high-level spinal cord injuries, this could be life changing.

COST OBSTACLES

AI-powered mobility devices and smart control systems can cost thousands of US dollars. This can translate into tens or even thousands of rands for South Africans. Many assistive devices developed overseas are designed for environments with smooth pavements, reliable electricity, affordable internet and stable mobile networks.

These conditions do not reflect the daily experiences of many South Africans. Our devices may need to operate during power cuts, function without constant internet access and move across uneven roads or unpaved terrain. They need to be affordable to repair and simple enough to maintain locally.

LIGHTWEIGHT SOLUTIONS

Brain-computer interfaces often receive the most international attention. These systems allow users to control devices through brain activity. Although promising, it remains extremely expensive and medically complex. Less invasive systems may offer a more practical path.

Lightweight AI uses a camera to follow eye movements, detect facial gestures or recognise intentional blinks. It can run on small computers and affordable processors without requiring complex surgery or specialist medical equipment.

Researchers at Nelson Mandela University, for example, developed an intelligent wheelchair control system using a five-megapixel infrared camera and a Raspberry Pi 4 computer. The system uses facial-tracking software to identify hundreds of points on the user's face. It follows the direction of the eyes and measures intentional blinks to recognise commands. The system reportedly achieved a command recognition accuracy of 98.71 percent, even in very dark conditions.

It was built using relatively affordable, widely available components, which shows that advanced assistive technology does not always require expensive custom hardware.

ON-DEVICE SOLUTIONS

A smart wheelchair can use cameras and sensors to identify obstacles, dangerous edges, uneven ground or possible drop-offs. It can then make small adjustments to the user's steering input to reduce the risk of a collision or fall while the user still decides where to go. AI acts as a safety layer.

This type of support is especially valuable in environments where paths may be damaged, pavements may be missing and wheelchair users must constantly navigate unexpected hazards. Computer vision systems can run

on small processors such as the NVIDIA Jetson range.

The most valuable feature of these systems may be their ability to continue working without internet. A device that depends entirely on online servers become unreliable when data runs out, the network fails or power cuts out. It can mean losing access to an essential part of daily life.

This is why offline and on-device AI is so important for Africa. With on-device processing, the camera, microphone or sensors send information directly to a small computer inside the device. The AI makes decisions locally instead of sending every command to a distant server. This allows the system to respond faster, protect the user's privacy and continue working without a constant internet connection.

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL SPEECH

Local voice technology is another important area of development. Many international voice assistants struggle to understand African accents, languages and speech patterns. This can make voice control unreliable. African technology companies are working to change this. Lelapa AI's Vulavula platform is being developed to support African languages and speech. Intron Health has worked on speech-recognition systems designed to understand African accents more accurately. These tools could eventually support hands-free control of computers, wheelchairs, phones and smart home devices.

BEYOND THE PROTOTYPE

South Africa already has the talent and technical ability to develop these systems. Researchers at Wits University have shown how affordable consumer electronics, including sensors from Nintendo Wii controllers, can be adapted for hands-free computer control. Projects such as the Dassie X rural power wheelchair show that mobility devices can be designed around rough terrain, limited transport and the need to fit into public minibus taxis.

The next challenge is moving from research prototypes to reliable products. Organisations such as Uku'Hamba show how local manufacturing can combine social impact with practical innovation. By using 3D printing and recycled materials, local enterprises can produce adaptive products while creating technical training and employment opportunities for young people with disabilities.

Universities should work more closely with manufacturers, disability organisations and social enterprises. Telecommunications and technology companies also have a role to play. They could subsidise locally produced assistive hardware, support the development of accessibility software and reduce data costs for essential digital services.

KEEPING THE USER CENTRAL

Assistive technology should always be developed with people with disabilities rather than for them. Lived experience can reveal problems and guide better decisions about comfort, safety, maintenance and everyday use. Organisations like the QuadPara Association of South Africa can help researchers and manufacturers with testing, training, distribution and long-term support.

Accessibility tools should not be treated as optional luxury products. For many people, they are a necessity. South Africa does not need to wait for foreign technology companies to reduce their prices. We can combine affordable AI with locally designed hardware that works offline, survives unstable infrastructure and reflects the realities of our communities. We already have the researchers, engineers, disability advocates and local innovators required to begin. R

Sandile Mkhize, a T5 complete paraplegic and drone industry research and development software developer. Passionate about improving accessibility through smart engineering, assistive technology, and global collaboration.

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More than a seat at the table, a voice

Inclusion means more than just a seat at a table. It means taking people with disabilities seriously, and breaking down epistemic injustice

You've got the ramp. You've got the accessible bathroom. You might even have the latest assistive software. But when you tell your manager that a new office policy is creating a barrier for you, are they actually listening? Or are they nodding politely while filing your concerns away as a "personal preference" or an "inconvenience"?

In the world of disability rights, we often talk about physical access and employment quotas. But there is a quieter, more invisible form of unfairness that many of us face every day in the workplace. Experts call it "epistemic injustice". It's a fancy term for a simple, frustrating reality: Your knowledge and lived experience as a person with a disability are systematically ignored, silenced or devalued.

INCLUDED DOESN'T MEAN BEING HEARD

Epistemic injustice happens when an employee with a disability reports a barrier, like an inaccessible system or an unrealistic performance goal, and the boss dismisses it as being "subjective" or "unreliable". Over time, you might find yourself physically present in the office, but intellectually excluded from the very decisions that affect your work and life.

In South Africa, our laws don't use the phrase "epistemic injustice" yet, but they certainly protect you against the behaviour that causes it. Whether it's being left out of a meeting about your own job requirements or having your requests for reasonable accommodation ignored without a good reason, these aren't just "office politics", they are potential violations of your legal rights.

THE LAW IS ON YOUR SIDE

You aren't just asking for a favour when you speak up about your needs. You are exercising your rights. Three major laws form the foundation of your protection in the South African workplace:

- **Constitution**: Guarantees your right to equality and dignity;
- **Employment Equity Act**: Prohibits unfair discrimination and requires employers to provide "reasonable accommodation"; and

- **Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act**: Ensures that equality isn't just a symbol, but a reality.

The most important thing to remember is that "equality" doesn't just mean you are allowed to walk (or roll) through the door. It means substantive participation. This means you have a legal right to be meaningfully heard and included in workplace decision-making. If an employer consistently disregards your lived experience, they may be failing in their legal duty to accommodate you.

WHAT CAN YOU DO

If you feel your voice is being silenced at work, you don't have to just "tough it out". You have agency, and there are clear steps you can take to turn your experience into a formal claim:

- **Start a paper trail**: Document everything. Keep a record of dates, e-mails, and notes from meetings where your concerns were dismissed. This moves the conversation from "he-said-she-said" to a factual record of exclusion.
- **File an internal grievance**: Most workplaces have a formal process. Use it. Submit a written grievance to HR that clearly states the barrier you are facing and how it impacts your dignity and performance. Frame it as a failure of the employer to meet their legal obligations under the Employment Equity Act.
- **Engage in the process**: Your employer is legally required to investigate and consult with you. They should look at expert input and discuss alternative options with you fairly.
- **Escalate to the CCMA**: If your workplace won't listen, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) will. You can refer a case of unfair discrimination or a failure to accommodate here.
- **Equality or Labour Courts**: For very serious or ongoing patterns of exclusion, you can take your case to the Equality Court or the Labour Court. These courts can provide systemic remedies and ensure your rights to dignity are respected.

YOUR EXPERIENCE IS EXPERTISE

We need to shift the way we think about the workplace. Being listened to isn't just a matter of office kindness, it is a legal requirement. When an employer ignores what you know about your own disability, they are signalling that you aren't a "legitimate knower" of your own life.

By standing up and insisting that your voice be heard, you aren't just fighting for yourself. You are helping to reshape South African workplaces into spaces where knowledge is recognised, dignity is respected, and participation is real for everyone. You are the expert on your own life; it's time the workplace acknowledged that. R

Aaron Togarasei Mupeti is an attorney, disability rights activist, Board Member of the Quadriplegic Association of South Africa (QASA), and Chairperson of QuadPara Gauteng South (QAGS). He is passionate about advancing disability rights, promoting accessibility, and advocating for the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in all areas of society. Visit his practice at www.mupetilaw.co.za.

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Proudly on the autism spectrum

Embodying kindness and celebrating his uniqueness, Matthew shares his experience of life with invisible disabilities

Invisible disabilities often present similar challenges as physical disabilities, like navigating an inaccessible, unaccommodating world, along with its own unique challenges like deciding when to disclose your disability. Diagnosed with autism around age three, Matthew has navigated these challenges for the past 19 years. He has also been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive Compulsion Disorder (OCD) and general anxiety, which has presented even more challenges. However, he remains proud and true to himself: "I am proudly on the autism spectrum and proudly have ADHD".

A GOOD FOUNDATION

From age five, Matthew attended a school for learners with autism, which he greatly enjoyed. The teachers were friendly and understood his needs and how to assist him with some of his challenges. With small classes, Matthew received a lot of individual attention. The school didn't have traditional subjects. Instead, the focus was on life skills like cooking, shopping, making a bed, ironing, washing and how to dress himself.

"All the things he needs every day," shares Barbara, Matthew's mother. This helped build a strong foundation for the challenges that Matthew would face later in life. He still considers this some of his favourite years.

"I will always be grateful for that. The younger years were much better than some of the others," he shares. Specifically, the higher levels of schooling proved challenging. He was in boys-only classes with a lot of staff changes. Fortunately, he preserved and completed his schooling. Now, he is working on his further education with online courses, which suit him better. He can work at his own pace without the noise and distractions of being in a classroom.

LEARNING ACCEPTANCE

While Matthew is now very accepting and proud of his disabilities, it took him a while to get there. For a long time, he wanted to be neurotypical. Now, Matthew believes authenticity is the best. He shares: "It is really important that you accept yourself".

A big part of acceptance is knowing who to listen to. Matthew's advice to other children

with autism is not to listen to the snarky comments: "It's okay to be autistic. You're fine just the way you are. Don't listen to people who make nasty and snarky comments about autism. They don't know you. They don't serve you and they don't serve any purpose in your life. I just ignore them."

It is a lesson that has been engrained in Matthew since a young age by his mother. Barbara taught him to realise that people like that "are not worth your time or your effort because being angry is a waste of energy". She always encouraged Matthew to walk away from negative situations or people who were a bad influence on him.

LEARNING TO COPE

When Matthew was younger, he would get angry. With multiple disabilities and general anxiety disorder, Matthew has come up with coping strategies to help him calm down when he feels overwhelmed, there is a change or something exciting is happening. He found taking out his frustrations and anger on a boxing bag very helpful when he was young. As he learned to identify his feelings, he started talking about them as a way to process. He continues to work on managing his emotions in healthy ways.

His father, Craig, has also been diagnosed with autism. He has been able to give Matthew some coping strategies, which include stimming, splashing cold water in his face, and ensuring he doesn't skip meals so that his blood sugar levels remain constant.

NAVIGATING AN INACCESSIBLE WORLD

For Matthew, being around smokers, having people in his personal space and hand dryers in public bathrooms are common obstacles. He also finds navigating social media challenging. Matthew strongly feels that he should disclose his disability. However, Barbara argues that people try and take advantage of his kindness. She has raised her concern with how Matthew discloses his disability very early on in conversations with strangers at times. He is unlearning this: "It is important to be careful of who you trust on social media."

FINDING COMMUNITY

Considering the challenges of social media, Barbara wishes for more social groups for people with autism so that individuals like Matthew can socialised in a safe environment where they are understood.

Recently, Matthew has joined an afternoon walking club with his dad. They enjoy this special time together out in the fresh air, away from screens. He mentioned that being part of this group has been amazing: "They have been so kind, so loving and understanding. Joining the walking group is something that I really look forward to doing".

These regular walks allow him to stay safe, be part of a group, walk at his own pace and chat to others. Socialising is very important to Matthew.

EMBODYING KINDNESS

Being kind to each other is very important to Matthew who strives to be kind. It is one of his many strengths as Barbara shares: "He is very kind and very funny, but he does obsess about some things. Another strength is that he is very sociable. He can talk to just about anyone. He is too trusting, which might be because of his small caring and nurturing schooling environment. He has been burned a few times on social media. He also over-shares sometimes, which is a normal ADHD thing".

While he is still learning how to be kind and keep himself safe, Matthew continues to celebrate his uniqueness and call on others to do the same: "We are all unique just the way we are. We shouldn't be judgmental to each other. We should just be kind." R

Dr **Emma McKinney** owner of Disability Included Consultancy, a company providing disability employment and educational research, training, support, and resources.

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Finding focus through Adaptive Archery

From improving focus to upper body strength, adaptive archery is a great, inclusive sport for people with disabilities

There's something powerful about drawing a bow, taking aim and releasing an arrow with precision. Archery demands focus, patience and control. In return, it teaches archers confidence and determination. It helps build upper-body strength, coordination, and stability, while also improving concentration and mental discipline.

To explore the sport, Adaptive Sports Fund hosted an Adaptive Archery Day at the Odyssey Archery Range, which was very welcoming. Participants of all abilities had the opportunity to step up to the line, draw their bow and shoot at the target.

For many, it was their first time holding a bow. With that came a mix of excitement and uncertainty. It didn't take long for hesitation to turn into determination.

All the necessary equipment was provided with the invaluable guidance of Shaun, a Paralympian, who coached and supported participants throughout the session. His expertise, patience and encouragement helped each archer understand the fundamentals of adaptive techniques. He made the learning process both accessible and enjoyable.

Archery is uniquely suited to adaptive sport. With the ability to modify equipment and technique, participants can shoot from seated positions, use assistive release aids or adapt their grip. This flexibility makes the sport highly inclusive.

What stood out most on the day was the sense of focus and calm that settled over the range. In a world that often feels fast-paced and overwhelming, archery requires you to slow down, breathe and be fully present in the moment. Each shot becomes a personal challenge of steadying the hands, aligning the target and trusting the release.

The breakthrough moment for many came when their first arrow hit the target; when they realised that they can do this! From there, the confidence just grew. Laughter, encouragement, and friendly competition

filled the air as archers began to find their groove.

The supportive environment at Odyssey Archery Range played a key role in making the day a success. A heartfelt thank you to the team for creating a welcoming and accessible space where everyone felt comfortable to try, learn, and grow. Their guidance and enthusiasm ensured that each participant could safely enjoy the experience and leave with a sense of achievement.

As always, events like this would not be possible without the backing of our incredible sponsors: Verder, Joey Evans, and the STM Team. Their continued support allows Adaptive Sports Fund to introduce new sports and opportunities to our community, helping more people discover what they are capable of.

At Adaptive Sports Fund, we believe that sport has the power to unlock potential. Whether you hit the bullseye or not, stepping up and taking that first shot is already a victory. R

Jeffrey Yates writes for the Adaptive Sports Fund (ASF) is a non-profit company, committed to supporting individuals with disabilities and breaking down barriers and creating a more equitable and just world for all people, regardless of their abilities. and with the following objectives: Supporting, enriching, encouraging, motivating and providing resources that empower individuals with disabilities to achieve their goals for them to live their best lives and creating a more accessible and equitable society for all.

Get in touch: info@adaptivesportsfund.org

Rising phoenix personified

Like a phoenix, Siphiwo Tsotsa rose from the heart break of a paralysing rugby injury to become a leader in his community

A phoenix rising from the ashes. If ever someone personified this metaphor, it's Siphiwo Tsotsa, who went from lying paralysed on a rugby pitch to becoming a pillar of strength in the Fort Beaufort community.

On 6 July 1996, a 33-year-old Siphiwo was playing lock for Crusaders Rugby Football Club against the Black Hawks at Newtown rugby field when his world came crashing down.

"I jumped into the air to catch the kick-off," Siphiwo recalls. "Unfortunately, my props didn't support me, and while I was in the air, our opponents bulldozed me. I turned upside down and landed straight onto my head with my whole body weight, breaking my neck."

"I still remember not feeling anything in my whole body. I could hear and see, but not talk. It was then that I knew that I was paralysed," he shares. Siphiwo had sustained an incomplete C2 spinal cord injury and was taken to Fort Beaufort Provincial Hospital. He was then transferred to St Dominic's Hospital in East London and finally to Conradie Hospital in Cape Town a week later, where he underwent rehabilitation for an extremely long and challenging 18 months.

He continues to manage neurological issues down the left side of his body, but is able to walk and remains disciplined and committed to his rehabilitation. So much so that he exercises on his stationary bicycle and uses a vibration machine to support circulation and mobility on a daily basis. He shares: "I've always been disciplined, so the rehab has become part of my routine."

A Department Head at Richmond High School at the time of his injury, the tragic turn didn't deny but only delayed his destiny: becoming a mentor unlike any other. An inspirational leader who not only talked the talk but walked the walk, he was promoted to Deputy Principal in 1998, a position he held until 2016, when he was appointed Principle of Sakhululeka High School.

"I became a teacher because I had a love for children and a passion for the job," he

explained. "I taught Biology, now known as Life Sciences, and IsiXhosa home language. I thoroughly enjoyed being in class with learners. As a Principal, I enjoyed leading the team. It was a great honour and taught me how to truly respect everyone."

Given the challenges he faced and overcame with remarkable determination, Siphiwo was uniquely able to offer learners holistic advice. "The most important lesson I instilled in learners was that education comes first, before anything else. That, and one's faith in God. If I wasn't educated, I would never have made it in life," he shares.

After a stellar career, he retired in 2023. However, as a rugby man through and through, he still passes on more knowledge, passion and belief to generations of young players as President of Crusaders Rugby Football Club.

"I still love rugby very much. I love coaching the under-16 boys and being President of the club," he says proudly. He enjoys watching sports, especially the rugby practices at the school and club.

Explaining his love of rugby, he said it's more than a game: "At first, as a youngster, it was all about the enjoyment and the fun of playing rugby, but it became more than just that as I got older. Rugby teaches you a lot about respect, discipline and endurance."

Siphiwo is well and truly living a full life and is also a proud husband and father of two. He shares: "My family means the world to me. They've always been very supportive. They visited me frequently and also played a big role in my rehabilitation process."

"I'm married to a beautiful young woman, whom I love very much, and we're blessed with wonderful kids. We have a boy who also plays rugby and who's a promising fullback for Winterberg Agricultural School's A team, and we have a beautiful girl who's doing her last year as a social worker at Boston College in East London."

ABOVE: Siphiwo Tsotsa (middle) with his son (left) and wife (right).

His support system also includes the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund. Founded in 1980, the Players' Fund has assisted over 600 players who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries while playing the game they love and currently supports 77 recipients as Rugby's Caring Hands.

"The Players' Fund has played a very prominent role in my life, both physically and emotionally," says Siphiwo. "I'm very grateful for everything they've done for me and for their ongoing support."

Looking back on the road he's travelled in life, Siphiwo concludes: "There are many lessons that I've learned from my injury. I achieved more after my injury than before, so I'd say the most important lesson is that your disability doesn't have to stop you from reaching your life goals." R

Quintin van Jaarsveld writes on behalf of the Players' Fund. If you would like to support the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund, visit their website at www.playersfund.org.za and select any number of the giving options available, which include EFT, payfast, Snapscan and Zapper.

Get in touch: contact@playersfund.org.za

Vikings club builds futures

As part of a series profiling wheelchair rugby clubs in the South African Wheelchair Rugby League, we take a closer look at the Vikings Wheelchair Rugby Club

North of Pretoria, in Soshanguve, a wheelchair rugby club is creating opportunities, developing athletes and demonstrating the transformative power of sport.

Vikings Wheelchair Rugby Club was established in 2012 at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) by Coach Victor Buitendag. From the outset, the club benefited from the support of TUT, which provided training facilities, transport and sporting equipment.

This allowed the team to establish itself within South African wheelchair rugby. The name "Vikings" reflects those university roots and remains a proud reminder of where the club's journey began.

The club quickly became affiliated with South Africa Wheelchair Rugby (SA WCR) and began competing in league tournaments and cup competitions. Today, Vikings competes within the Gauteng North Region, aligned to the Blue Bulls provincial structure.

EXPANDING WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

One of the defining characteristics of the club has been its willingness to adapt in pursuit of a greater purpose. Many newly injured quadriplegic patients were leaving rehabilitation without meaningful opportunities for ongoing physical activity or social connection.

With this in mind, the club relocated its training base to Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (formerly MEDUNSA), close to George Mukhari Hospital.

The move was strategic. It created a direct pathway for newly injured wheelchair users to discover wheelchair rugby during one of the most challenging periods of their lives. The club recognised that sport could play an important role in improving physical health, emotional wellbeing, social integration and long-term quality of life. This commitment to outreach has remained central to Vikings' identity.

INVESTING IN YOUTH

As the club evolved, another opportunity

emerged. Vikings relocated once again, this time to Filadelfia School for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) in Soshanguve.

The school serves learners with physical disabilities and provided an ideal environment to introduce wheelchair rugby to younger athletes. The partnership has become one of the club's greatest strengths.

It provides a pathway into the sport for the learners while securing the long-term sustainability of the club by developing future generations of players. Today, Filadelfia School proudly serves as the home of Vikings Wheelchair Rugby Club.

BUILT BY DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

Many individuals have shaped Vikings over the years. Among the club's founding players were Lesley Nkosi, who continues to serve as Chairperson and mentor to the team, together with pioneers including Meshack Sesana, Moses Mhlanga, Lesedi Mphahlele, Basetsana Ledwaba, Lovedean, Israel Mathumbu, Bongani Makama, Nicolene Ngobeni and the late Dean Sambo.

Coach Samuel Ramatladi joined the club in 2015 and recruited a new generation of athletes while securing improved training facilities and transport support. During his time with Vikings, he also established the partnership with Filadelfia School that continues to benefit the club today.

In 2021, Petronella Khanya returned to Vikings as Head Coach after several years away from the sport. With a degree in Sport

MAIN AND TOP: The Vikings Wheelchair Rugby Club is based in Soshanguve, North of Pretoria.
CENTER AND ABOVE: Coach Petronella Khanya returned to the club in 2021.

Management from Tshwane University of Technology, she combines technical knowledge with a deep passion for athlete development and disability sport. Her return marked the beginning of a new chapter focused on rebuilding, expanding participation and strengthening the club's future.

MORE THAN A GAME

For many Vikings athletes, wheelchair rugby represents far more than competition. Many players come from disadvantaged communities where opportunities for people with disabilities are limited. Some face unemployment. Others have struggled academically or found few opportunities after leaving school. Wheelchair rugby offers purpose, routine, friendship and ambition.

Coach Petronella believes that sport creates confidence, develops resilience and opens doors that might otherwise remain closed. Her vision extends beyond producing successful rugby players. She wants to help athletes build independent, fulfilling lives. That philosophy is evident throughout the club.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Vikings club has always recognised that successful teams are built away from competition as much as during it. Over the years, the club has organised excursions to Durban, movie outings and numerous social activities that strengthen relationships between teammates. Players support one another beyond rugby by attending weddings, family celebrations and important life events together.

The club has also been active in disability awareness campaigns throughout Gauteng, including community engagements and interviews on Motsweding FM.

Between 2019 and 2020, the Vikings collaborated with the Ball for All Foundation during an attempt to break a Guinness World Record for wheelchair dancing, demonstrating that disability sport can inspire communities in many different ways.

ABOVE: The Viking players are remarkably committed to the sport, often travelling considerable distances despite financial hardship and accessibility challenges.

COMPETING WITH DETERMINATION

Although Vikings operates with limited resources, the club continues to compete consistently within the SA WCR League. One of its notable achievements came in 2019, when the club earned a bronze medal at a national tournament in Bloemfontein.

While medals remain important, Vikings measures success in many ways. Every athlete recruited, every player who gains confidence, and every individual who discovers new purpose through the sport represents another victory for the club.

DEVELOPING ATHLETES

Training takes place every Wednesday and Saturday, where athletes work to improve their physical conditioning, wheelchair

skills, tactical understanding and teamwork. The commitment shown by the players is remarkable. Many travel considerable distances despite financial hardship and accessibility challenges simply because they believe in what the club represents.

Coach Petronella continues to encourage athletes to pursue excellence, even when resources are limited. She believes that commitment and perseverance will eventually create new opportunities for both individuals and the club as a whole.

CALL FOR INVESTMENT

Like many community disability sports organisations, Vikings faces significant financial challenges. The club requires additional rugby wheelchairs, maintenance and repairs to existing equipment, gloves, straps, rugby balls and training equipment.

Reliable transport remains one of the greatest barriers to participation, particularly for athletes travelling long distances. Funding is also needed to support tournament participation, accommodation, meals, registration fees, coaching development and athlete support programmes. Investment in Vikings is an investment in far more than sport. It is an investment in education, social inclusion, health, confidence, and opportunity.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Vikings Wheelchair Rugby Club continues to pursue a simple, powerful vision: to promote inclusion, develop talented athletes and empower people with disabilities through sport.

With strong leadership, a sustainable partnership with Filadelfia School and a growing pathway for young athletes, the club is well positioned to continue shaping the future of wheelchair rugby in northern Gauteng. R

South Africa Wheelchair Rugby (SAWCR) is the official administrator of the wheelchair rugby in South Africa. The association is involved in all aspects from development and local club support to game officials and managing the national wheelchair rugby league. For more information, please contact admin@sawcr.co.za or visit the official Facebook page at @SAWheelchairRugby.

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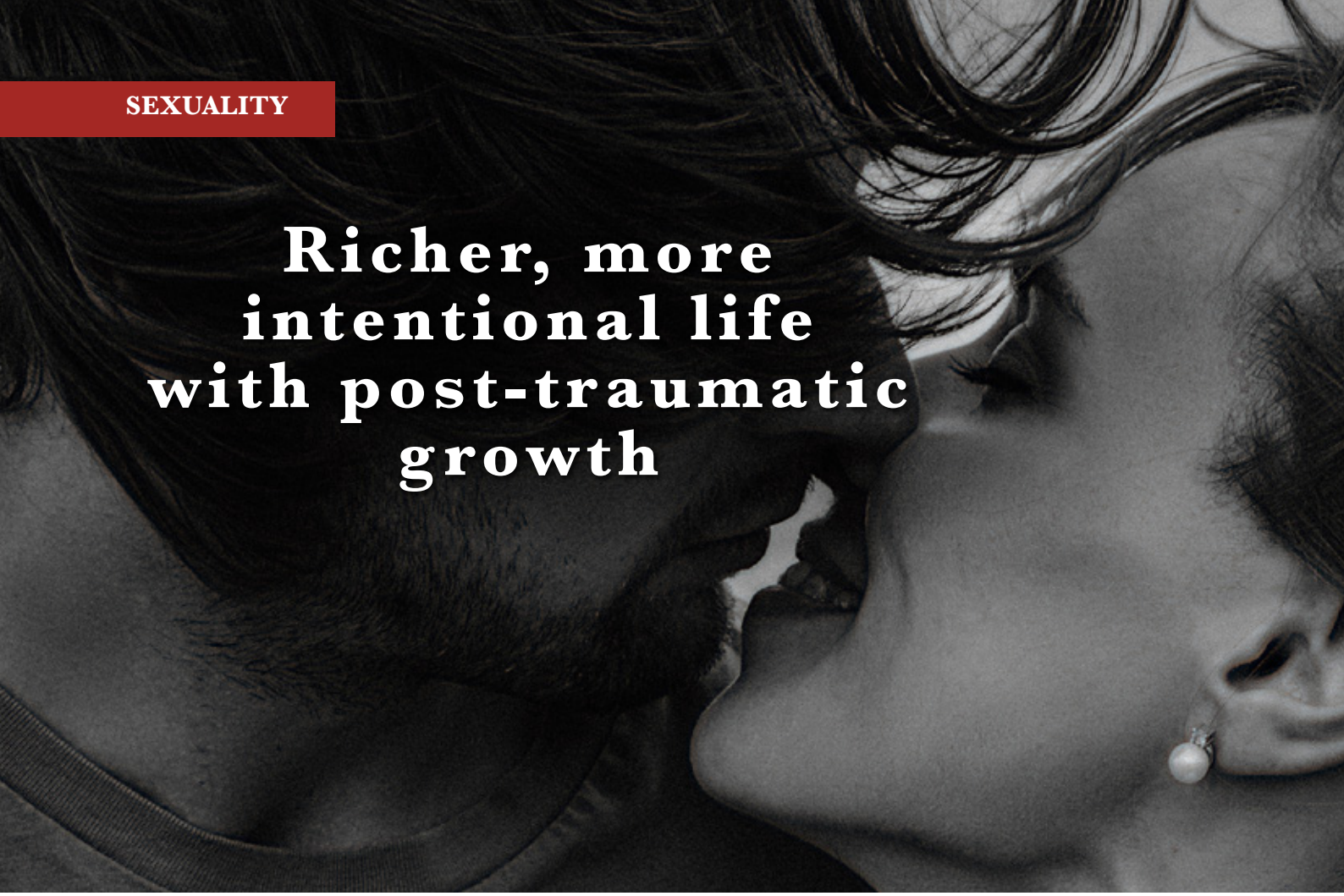

Richer, more intentional life with post-traumatic growth

A spinal cord injury could result in post-traumatic growth, which leads to a richer, more intentional life

A spinal cord injury (SCI) inevitably involves coming to terms with loss. The sexual relationship that existed before the injury has changed, together with all the other changes you might be navigating already.

However, the full story of sexuality after an SCI is not only one of loss. It could also be one of unexpected growth.

For many people, what unfolds in the months and years that follow an SCI is not simply a return to where things were, but a journey toward something they had not experienced before the injury.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Research in the field of trauma psychology has shown that many people who experience life-altering events do not simply recover and return to who they were before. Many of them grow beyond it, emerging with a richer and more intentional life than the one they had before. This is known as Post-Traumatic Growth, and it is particularly common in the area of intimate relationships.

> **“Many grow beyond it, emerging with a richer and more intentional life than the one they had before.**

What makes this especially relevant for people navigating sexuality after an SCI is that the conditions most likely to produce post-traumatic growth are the same conditions the injury created.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

The reason for this becomes clearer when we

consider the role that physical spontaneity plays in many relationships before an injury.

Couples often rely on things happening naturally, without much deliberate thought or conversation about their sexual needs and preferences. When that changes after an SCI, couples find themselves having conversations that many of them have never had before.

> **Couples find themselves having conversations that many have never had before.**

Conversations like what feels good now, what they are afraid of and what intimacy means to them at this point in their lives. That kind of honesty is uncomfortable to begin with, and yet it is precisely what deepens a relationship.

Partners often describe it as the most genuine exchange they have ever had about their sexual relationship, and the effects tend to reach beyond the bedroom.

INTENTIONAL INTIMACY

The other reason for this unexpected growth is what happens when people begin to explore their bodies with fresh curiosity. Sensation is often discovered in places that received little attention before.

The focus shifts from what used to happen to what is actually happening, and that shift can bring a quality of presence and attentiveness to physical intimacy that was not there before.

Partners often report becoming more attuned to each other in ways that enrich the experience for both of them.

What initially presents as limitation can, over time, become something more fulfilling than what existed before the injury.

GRIEVING THE LOSS

It would be misleading to suggest that this is the experience of everyone. For some people, the losses remain the dominant reality, and that is equally valid.

Growth and grief are not mutually exclusive, and neither one cancels out the other.

What tends to make the difference is a willingness to stay curious together, about each other's experience and about what your sexual relationship can become.

If you are somewhere in that process right now, the invitation is not to push toward a particular outcome but to remain open to the possibility that something meaningful can emerge from this experience. R

Dr **Danie Breedt** is a passionate scholar-practitioner in the field of psychology. He divides his time between training, research and clinical practice. Danie works from an integrative interactional approach in psychotherapy, dealing with a wide range of emotional difficulties and sexual rehabilitation for patients with disabilities. He is the co-owner of Charis Psychological Services, a psychology practice that specialises in physical rehabilitation across South Africa.

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Motivational speaker and *Rolling Inspiration* Issue 2 cover woman, Brittany McCormick is on a mission to raise R60 000 for the QASA Employment Programme through her Core of Courage campaign.

Every day for the next seven months (or until she reaches her goal), Brittany will do 100 crunches and 20 minutes of planking. She hopes to show and remind people that they have value and are capable of making an impact regardless of their limitations.

Officially launched in June, the campaign has already raised R7 275. Support the campaign by donating through BackaBuddy and following along with her journey on Facebook or Instagram. R

Professional or aspiring photographers are encouraged to submit their photos to *Rolling Inspiration* for use. We are specifically looking for stock photos (general or generic photos) of wheelchair users that could be used in the magazine.

Contact us at rollinginspiration@qasa.co.za with any questions or to submit your photos for consideration. Payment will only take place if and after your photo has been published in the magazine. R

2026 Events Calendar

ADAPTIVE PADEL
8 August 2026
The Adaptive Sports Fund will be trying out Adaptive Padel on 8 August 2026. Visit their Facebook page for more information or contact them at info@adaptivesportsfund.org.

WORLD SCI DAY
5 September 2026
World Spinal Cord Injury Day is held every year on 5 September. The 2026 theme is "From Awareness to Action: Ten Years Advancing SCI Prevention". Visit the International Spinal Cord Society (ISCoS) website for more information.

CASUAL DAY
4 September 2026
Casual Day is an annual fundraiser by the National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD). This year, the theme is "Beat as One: Rhythm Matters". To support the campaign, visit the online store at www.casualday.co.za/shop/ to purchase your sticker or merchandise.

ADAPTIVE GOLF
12 September 2026
The Adaptive Sports Fund will be trying out Adaptive Golf on 12 September 2026. Visit their Facebook page for more information or contact them at info@adaptivesportsfund.org.

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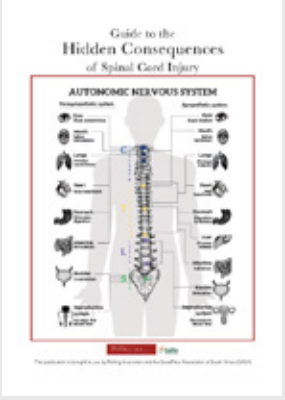

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