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Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Roger Gardner • May 18, 2014

EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Roger Gardner

Gary Barg: When we started publishing 20 years ago, you were one of the first folks out there who really taught me about the fact that the home could be such a dangerous place for caregivers and for the disabled and seniors for whom we care. Most accidents in the home happen in the bathroom, and most hospitalizations and long-term care placements come from these accidents. I understand that. And now you are taking on the challenge of making sure we care for our backs. Why is that important?

Roger Gardner: We first came out with a modification to the existing bathtub. You can cut the front out of their bathtub, allowing the person to go in and out with ease. There is no step over that 20-inch threshold. It is reduced by nine inches. We're putting those modifications in many homes and care facilities.

Gary Barg: And now?

Roger Gardner: The most recent thing we've come up with is called a Bathchair Lift. It is non-AC powered. If Grandma can get into the bathroom somehow, in her wheelchair or just shuffling in, she can sit on the chair at the edge of her bathtub, relax and push the button. It will lift her up and over the bathtub threshold. Then it rotates her over the warm water and sets her down into the bath for a nice full bubble bath. There's nothing as therapeutic as a warm bath. I think we all pretty well know that.

Gary Barg: You know, this connection between bathroom and back safety makes sense. It would have to be you guys to have made that connection because you've been involved in this for so long. Can this lift actually be used in other rooms in the house?

Roger Gardner: Yes. We actually can use the lift in any room. It is moveable. We have a swing lift that is the exact same product. It's just a different configuration that we put at the bedside. It takes the place of the Hoyer and is one-person operated. Push the button, the person lifts up, swings over, and sits in their power chair. We have put the same swing lifts in the bathroom where it will lift the person up, swing them over, and seat them on the toilet. Then lift them off the toilet, swing around and put them in the shower. It is really incredible. Quads just love it. Paraplegics love it. And the caregivers absolutely love it, because there is zero lifting. I have a bad back myself and just don't have tolerance for lifting. When my mom was living with us, it was nearly impossible to lift her. We had to figure out a way to solve the problem without breaking my back or my wife's back. So we came up with this chair lift. It's battery operated and people love it. It is so simple and elegant and it works all the time.

Gary Barg: When you were talking about the home, I realized that for people living in long-term care facilities and nursing homes, and even the staff, this is a big issue, too. Is this something you think is appropriate for professional living facilities as well?

Roger Gardner: Absolutely. We have one in a facility in Cashmere, Washington. They're using it with five and six people every day, seven days a week. Their professional caregivers can now easily bathe their clients without having to lift them. I don't know about where you live, but up here in the west, the good Lord didn't give people handles to get a hold of. So how are you supposed to lift a person up without a handle?

Gary Barg: Funny and true.

Roger Gardner: This lift gives us a button that we can push. A simple push button. That will lift them and there is no back strain at all. Zero lifting.

Gary Barg: Well, the back strain is the issue.

Roger Gardner: Oh, yes. And coming out of the bathing situation, they're usually soapy and wet. And they're slippery. There's nothing to hold on to. And, like I say, the handles just aren't there. (Although my wife says I'm getting handles.) The caregiver's back is in a bent over position, which is the least strong. This is the most vulnerable position for a caregiver.

Gary Barg: If you as a family or professional caregiver try and lift somebody, who might even be struggling, now you're twisting. What you're saying is all the fulcrum pressure of the lift has now been given over to the equipment. Talk to me about the chair a bit.

Roger Gardner: Most people can remember when we were in grade school and we sat in those plastic blue chairs. That's the type of a chair it is. So it's easy to wash. It's comfortable. The chair has a bracket underneath that hooks onto a lifting arm. The lifting arm is elevated up and down with a hydraulic cylinder called an actuator, which is battery operated.

Gary Barg: That's nice. First of all, you're in the bathroom and you're not worried about plugging something into an electrical outlet. And second, if the electricity goes out, here's where you really need the support.

Roger Gardner: Yes, that is true. For that reason we are FDA registered and we're ADA compliant. The chair itself, after one sits on it and puts the safety bar down in front, is very comfortable. The caregiver or the client can push the buttons. I have a friend, Carol, who lives up in Manson. We put one in for her and she loves it. She said, "Roger, you know, that's the first bath I've had in over 10 years." The unit is very strong. It's good for a 350-pound person.

Gary Barg: Wow.

Roger Gardner: We pressure test every one at 450 before we ever ship them out. And, there are two batteries, so you can keep one on the charger. I don't know about you, but as I'm aging, I can't remember for sure when I last changed the battery in my car, let alone my bath lift.

Gary Barg: How do we contact you? How do we get the chair?

Roger Gardner: Take a look at our webpage at safebathtub.com. You will find the products that we have been talking about. All the information is there; even a video of our granddaughter as she's using one.

Gary Barg: Let me ask you this question I always ask of the experts I interview. What is the one most important piece of advice that you would like to share with family caregivers?

Roger Gardner: Be careful and take care of yourself. Your loved ones that you're taking care of are depending on you. And if you go down, they go down. Take care of yourself and then you can take care of them properly.

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