

A graphic illustration featuring three black silhouettes of hands. One hand on the left holds a blue gear, another hand on the right holds a green gear, and a third hand at the bottom holds a yellow gear. The background is a textured, light brown surface with faint, larger gears visible. The title 'Conference Collab' is written in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font with a purple outline. The word 'Conference' is on the top line and 'Collab' is on the bottom line. The blue gear is positioned between the 'C' and 'n' of 'Conference', the green gear is between the 'C' and 'l' of 'Collab', and the yellow gear is at the end of 'Collab'.

Conference Collab

The new Abilities International Accessibility Conference connects complex rehab technology professionals with the latest advancements in adaptive equipment and care.

The Abilities Expo has

long been an event that brings together hundreds of the latest products, services, resources and more focused on improving quality of life for people with disabilities, their families and caregivers. Held annually in six major cities across the U.S. throughout the

by Brittany Martin

year, the expos also include workshops and activities to help educate both the community and health care professionals.

This year, the event's organizers, Racoon Media Group, added a new educational opportunity.

The two-day Abilities International Accessibility Conference, held in conjunction with the expos in Los Angeles (Long Beach, Calif.), New York Metro (Edison, N.J.) and Chicago, was designed for occupational therapists, physical therapists, rehabilitation specialists, assistive technology profession-

ce oration

Katy Roberts, managing director
of the Abilities Portfolio, welcomes
attendees to the first Abilities
International Accessibility
Conference in Long Beach, Calif.

als (ATP), durable medical equipment providers and others in the complex rehab technology (CRT) field to learn, collaborate and ultimately improve care for people with disabilities.

A Unique Opportunity

The first conference March 26-27 at the Long Beach Convention Center in California featured two plenary panels and three education tracks with more than 30 workshops that reflected the patient's adaptive equipment journey, as well as networking opportunities and continuing education credits for attendees. The New Jersey conference was held April 30-May 1, and the Chicago conference took place June 11-12.

Katy Roberts, managing director of the Abilities Portfolio, says the conference is about more than learning new techniques or seeing new products. It's about strengthening health care professionals' ability to work better, smarter and with greater impact.

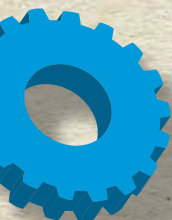


BRITTANY MARTIN



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD BY URBANITE LA

The two-day conference for complex rehab technology professionals was held in conjunction with the Abilities Expo in Long Beach, Calif.



Conference attendees had the opportunity to talk to vendors and test equipment.

“Complex rehab is exactly that — complex. It’s layered. Interdisciplinary. It’s constantly evolving, and it demands not just technical skill, but creativity, adaptability and collaboration,” Roberts says. “And that’s what this conference is built around and is unique in



bringing together a large part of the ecosystem that has operated in silos for some time.”

Roberts says having the conference alongside the Abilities Expo gives conference attendees a unique opportunity to close the loop and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

“The people you serve are here, too. Not in case studies, not in PowerPoints, but in real life,” she says. “And that changes the dynamic. It means that the concepts you’ll hear about in sessions, whether it’s seating and positioning, mobility technology, billing solutions or complex equipment prescriptions, you have the opportunity to see, test, question and experience almost immediately. You can walk from a session directly onto the floor and see the latest wheelchair technologies, adaptive equipment, assistive technology solutions and real users navigating real environments.”

That opportunity was hard to pass up for Rafael Ibarra, an ATP who previously worked for National Seating & Mobility. He traveled from Atlanta to Long Beach to attend the first conference.

“I think if I want to be the best provider for my clients, I have to stay on top of what’s new and available,” says Ibarra, who had polio and has used a wheelchair for about 42 years. “As I think our opening speaker [Roberts] said, here, you have the professionals, the clinicians and manufacturers, and now you get to see the end



The conference included educational workshops on wheelchair adjustments, left, and a small vendor expo.

users and interact with them and see what they like. What are they looking for that's new?"

Ibarra says attending conferences like the Abilities International Accessibility Conference helps health care professionals expand their minds and reminds them to go into work without preconceived notions and give their patients all the options available to them.

"I think that when you stop learning or think that I've heard it all, I know it all, then I think we do a disservice to our population who we serve," he says. "You get caught up

in the day-to-day, and you look at somebody, you go, 'Oh yeah, that's this disability. In my mind, this is the chair that you're going to get. This is the product you're going to get.' And I think coming here reminds us that each one is individual. And you have to treat them that way and make sure that even if they say, 'Well, this is what I want,' and you know in the back of your mind funding is probably not going to pay for it or insurance won't pay for it, but give them the options and then let them make that decision."



Interactive workshops gave conference attendees hands-on experience with wheelchair skills.



BRITTANY MARTIN

Panelists discuss changing needs for assistive devices as people age and disabilities progress.

Facing Change

Among the sessions designed for CRT professionals like Ibarra to learn practical skills and tips to provide better care was one titled Facing Change: The Many Facets of Adjustment in CRT.

The panelists discussed experiences with adjusting to their own or family members' needs for CRT for the first time, as well as adapting to more involved equipment requirements over time because of progressive conditions or aging with a disability. They also offered insights into emotional adjustment and equipment acquisition and use.

Laura Olsonoski, OTD, OTR/L, ATP, an occupational therapist and the owner of Moving Mountains Therapy Center in Missoula, Mont., says she asks her patients about their hobbies, where they like to spend their time, their modes of transportation and where they live to determine what type of equipment is best for each individual.

She says fully powered wheelchairs can be wonderful for some people, especially for those who want power tilt, recline and elevation options. But the chairs can be hard to maneuver and require frequent maintenance. People also need to consider the availability of accessible vans or public transportation.

Stan Arledge, ATP, SMS, who has been in the CRT industry and worked with custom wheelchair seating for 56 years, says power-

assist devices can serve as a bridge between manual and power wheelchairs, and the transition should be made before the user has completely taxed his or her shoulders.

"And it also gives them a backup [chair] when they need to go to full power," Arledge says. "And then now, [they] at least have that power-assist and manual chair as a backup so they can still go places and do things and make those choices, because it's [about having] a job, autonomy, possibilities."

Todd Hargroder, founder of Soul Mobility Inc. and adjunct faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh School of Rehabilitation Science and Technology, has spent the last 40 years using and adapting various mobility equipment. He says choosing a mobility device is a big task, and it takes a whole team to educate one another.

As a level C4/5 quadriplegic who was injured in a motocross accident at age 19, Hargroder acknowledges some people may feel like using a powered or power-assist device is "giving up" on manual mobility and walking. Instead, he reframes power assistance as a tool for freedom. He says having a little bit of power when it's needed or wanted can save a person's upper limbs for activities of daily living.

"Our days are long enough to begin with, they're hard enough to begin with, so use it

when you can," Hargroder says. "Have it fill those long days and just take a break."

He says users need to spend time trialing new equipment both in their homes and outdoors, and just because a chair performs well in the clinic doesn't necessarily mean it will perform the same way rolling down a city sidewalk.

For Hargroder, getting the right equipment helped move the needle from just surviving the day to having the energy to participate in life. And sometimes that meant designing his own equipment, which led to his first business, Accessible Designs Inc., which he sold in 2015. Some of his designs stemmed from shortcomings in other products that didn't meet his needs.

His most recent project with Soul Mobility is the Power-Flex power-assist device that converts a manual wheelchair to a power wheelchair and was highlighted in the June *PN* feature *Versatile Mobility*. However, Hargroder says power-assist isn't one-size-fits-all, and there are many other technology options to consider.

Tamara Kittelson, MS, OTR/L, ATP/SMS, an occupational therapist and executive director of the Clinician Task Force, says clinicians should take into account underlying emotional issues, such as denial, especially for people with new injuries or diagnoses. But it's still important to encourage users to take an active role in equipment selection and accept that they need that equipment.

Arledge also emphasizes the need to impart a sense of autonomy in clients by listening to what they really want and need, supporting them and helping them advocate for their needs when fighting denials with insurance providers.

"When you are looking at getting equipment, there's all of the trade-offs that go with it, and the fact that the client is the captain of the team, OK, because the rest of us are navigators," he says. "We have information, we have some history. We have what kind of products are available, and we can lay that out for them, but they are the ones that are making the decisions based on their priorities and the things that are most important to them in their life."



Attendees networked during the conference.

Consumer Is The Key

The focus on collaborating with the consumer is exactly what Roberts and event organizers hope complex rehab professionals take away from each Abilities International Accessibility Conference. She says similar breakout sessions will be presented at each conference location, but some will feature local speakers.

Next year, they'll be back in Long Beach Jan. 14-15 and hope to have the conference integrated into the expo show floor.

Roberts says they could expand the conferences to other locations in the future, but for now, the team will take the feedback from these conferences, assess and keep refining to ensure they're providing the best audience experience.

"Five years from now, I hope that we remain true to our original vision and goal, which is that the end user is at the core of everything we do and that we're able to have a co-located conference no matter how big it gets, which I have no doubt that it will get bigger, that keeps that integrity of the consumer being the main key to it all," she says.

For more information on the Abilities International Accessibility Conference, visit abilitiesconference.com. For information on the Abilities Expo, visit abilities.com.

For more stories from the conference, visit pnonline.com. ■

