CATCH the SPIRIT

SCI&D SPIRIT

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
VA Boston Healthcare System
Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorders

Better Than My Wildest Dreams

Raymond Kelly and his dog Boss

My name is Raymond Kelly. Injured 21 years ago, I am a C3-4 complete quadriplegic. I got my initial rehab at the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Center at the VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHS). Since then, they have assisted me with obtaining wheelchairs and equipment to improve my quality of life. I am married and have two sons. We live in northern New York State where only two months of the year it is warm enough to go outside on a consistent basis. Since 1993, I have never been able to go out of the house independently because I was unable to access the door.

Therefore, my days are typically spent watching TV and on my computer. I currently use a software program that allows me to control my computer with my voice. For twenty years, I could not access my TV. I had to rely on others to make changes for me: channels, volume, on/off. I hated to bother them for that small task. I also have trouble sleeping. I often wished I could pass the time by watching TV. However, I never wanted to wake anyone just to turn on the TV.

Last summer, I was at the SCI Center at VABHS for my annual SCI check-up. Bernadette Cummings, Occupational Therapist, was performing an annual assessment. She began to educate me about advances in Environmental Control Units (ECUs) that are controlled via voice activation. Initially, I wasn't thrilled with the idea. I had settled into my typical routines.

After further discussions and research, I decided to give the ECU a try. It has been incredible! It gives me the option of controlling up to six different remote control devices such as TVs, DVRs, VCRs, DVD players, etc. I can turn the lights on/off and control my hospital bed.

I am able to independently make and receive telephone calls. Though done over speakerphone, it is much better than bothering somebody to put a headset on me.

The ECU has also improved my access to the computer. Previously, someone had to place a headset on me. The ECU uses a wireless microphone. Now, I drive up to my computer, speak a command to the ECU, and dictate into the computer.

When I need immediate assistance in an emergency, a great safety feature allows me to activate an alarm.

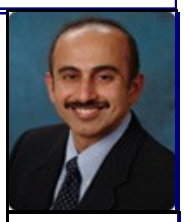
This unit has worked better than my wildest dreams. I cannot stress enough how much freedom it has given me. I am looking forward to the summer this year, because it lets me control an electric door opener.

These may seem like minor things, but to a person who has been so dependent on others for over 20 years, these "minor things" are a big deal to me. Gaining more control and freedom has been great and is important to me.

From someone who was initially resistant to trying this new technology, I now joke that if I could not use my ECU anymore, I would go into withdrawal!

The Value of An Annual Evaluation

In support of our mission to promote the health, independence, quality of life, and productivity of Veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders throughout their lives, one of the important services we offer at the SCI Center is a scheduled comprehensive annual evaluation. It involves a team of SCI experts from multiple disciplines who look at different aspects of health and well-being, to prevent or pick-up problems that may otherwise go unnoticed till they become more advanced. It also offers an opportunity to review equipment and supplies, and make adjustments based on advances in the field or changes in function, life-style, or goals. The story above provides one example of the value that the annual evaluation at the SCI Center provided this Veteran by identifying technology that has made such a significant change in his life!

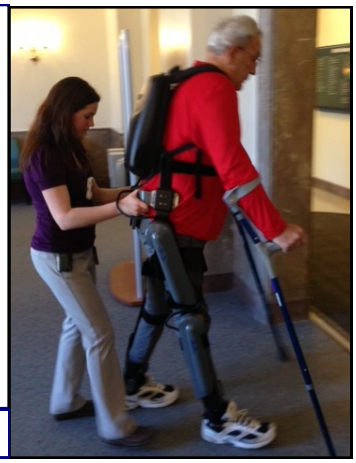


Sunil Sabharwal, MD
Chief SCI/D Services

The Bionic Man, Circa 2014

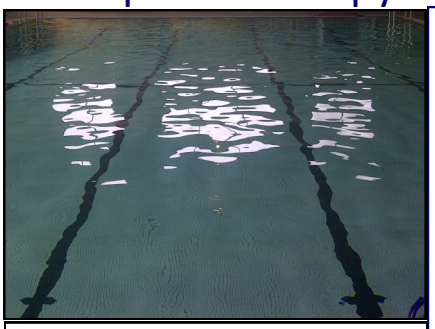
The VA Boston Healthcare System's Physical Therapy (PT) Department is offering a new technology, the exoskeleton. We now have this technology from two manufacturers (Rewalk™ and Ekso™). This is a bionic walking system that uses powered leg attachments to enable people with leg weakness to stand upright and take steps. It uses a backpack battery and is controlled by a wrist-mounted remote.

Currently, this technology is offered in a few select healthcare systems worldwide. It is appropriate for some people with leg weakness or paralysis who have functioning arms, shoulder muscles, and hands as well as the ability to tolerate standing and walking. If interested, ask your physician if this therapy and a referral to PT is appropriate for you.



Pictured right: Jessica Keen, PT spots Veteran Ed Thibault as he walks with the ReWalk™ Exoskeleton

Aquatic Therapy Program Begins for SCI Long Term Care Residents



Above: The pool at the Brockton campus

In August 2013, in response to interest from residents, we were successful in implementing a pool therapy program for residents of the long term care SCI unit at Brockton.

Qualified residents are evaluated by a physical therapist (PT) or kinesiotherapist (KT) and receive weekly co-treatment sessions with a KT/PT team.

A number of Veterans have since benefitted from this service with improvements in balance, strength, flexibility, ambulation and overall sense of well-being.

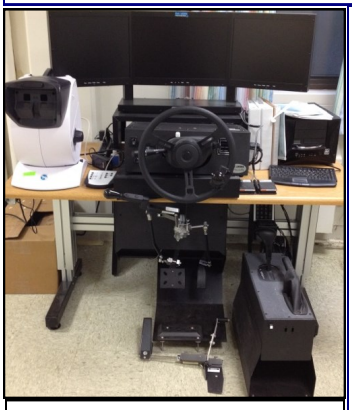
The Benefits of a Third Arm

There is a new technology on the market for manual wheelchair users called the Smartdrive. Although considered a power-assist device, it is different from other similar devices. Its push activated cruise control allows the user to get exercise from pushing yet receive assistance for travelling over distances and elevations.

The Smartdrive is mounted on the chair's axle and is easily removable. The battery pack is mounted below the seat pan. It can be used on folding chairs but must be removed prior to folding. To determine if this device may be helpful for you, please contact your physician for a referral to wheelchair clinic for an evaluation.

Above: Smartdrive on a wheelchair

On The Road Again



Above: Driver Simulation Station

The Brockton Campus is home to the only Driver Rehabilitation Training Program for the VA in New England Region. There are three occupational therapists who are specially trained to offer these services.

This program consists of driving safety/competency assessments and adaptive driving. Adaptive driving includes alternatives to conventional driving such as various hand controls, left foot accelerator pedals and reduced effort steering and braking.

The training is planned around the needs of each Veteran and generally consists of one hour sessions, 1-2 times per week for 1–12 weeks. It is offered year round using simulators, a wheelchair accessible van, and a sedan.

Driving offers independence and freedom for all people. If you would like to participate in the program, contact your physician for a referral to the Driver Rehab Program.

Retirement and Commencement

Sue Clark, LPN who worked on A2 and Norma Maxim, RN who worked on 81B both recently retired from VA BHS. Their commitment and dedication to our SCI Veterans was commendable. We wish them health and happiness in their next chapter of life!

Pictured Right: Left to Right: Sue Clark, LPN, Sharon Stone, RN, Rita Pontes, HT and Norma Maxim, RN

Elizabeth Mossi, PT, has joined the SCI staff on the West Roxbury campus of VA Boston Healthcare System. Elizabeth will be working in large part with the Spinal Cord Injury & Disorders (SCI/D) Home-Care team. One of her main areas of focus will be to work with Veterans as they transition from inpatient rehabilitation to home.

Elizabeth is an experienced SCI therapist. Most recently, she worked on an SCI wheelchair research project and a cardiac study. She looks forward to contributing to making the transition to home an easier and less stressful time for Veterans with SCI/D. Welcome to this new role, Elizabeth!

The Future

The 13th Spinal Cord Injury Interdisciplinary Conference was held on April 7, 2014 at the VA Boston Healthcare System (VA BHS). Over 60 attendees, both nursing students and professionals, learned about the specific needs of persons with SCI/D.

This Conference reflects the commitment of the SCI Service to educate the professional community about spinal cord injuries, disorders and rehabilitation.

Above, presenters at the conference left to right: Betty Gifford, LPN, Jennifer Gammon, RN, Michele Lacroix, RN

The Conference Program

- Introduction to Spinal Cord Injury
  Kelly D. Skinner, MSN, RN, CRRN, WCC, Np-C, GNP-BC
- Autonomic Dysreflexia
  Christine Azevedo, ADN, RN
- Improving Awareness of Disability: Model for Patients and Providers
  Maggi Budd, Ph.D., MPH, ABPP (RP)
- Bowel Management in Spinal Cord Injury
  Kelly D. Skinner, MSN, RN, CRRN, WCC, Np-C, GNP-BC
- Pressure Ulcer Prevention in SCI
  Jennifer Gammon, MSN, RN, WCC
- Bladder Management in Spinal Cord Injury
  Michele Lacroix, ADN, RN and Betty Gifford, LPN
- Nutrition and Spinal Cord Injury
  Angela DiTucci, RD, LDN
- Psychosocial Issues in Spinal Cord Injury
  Jeanine Penzo, MSW, LICSW
- Therapy Issues in Spinal Cord Injury
  Anthony, I. Calilung, PT, MS, RN
- Identifying and Treating Patient and Caregiver Burden following SCI
  Kysa Christie, Ph.D.
- Spinal Cord Injury from a Patient Perspective
  Wayne Ross, Veteran

Caregiver Corner

We All Get By with a Little Help

It is difficult for caregivers to watch a loved one experience functional decline over time, and sometimes the Veteran and family may struggle to acknowledge this reality. Accepting assistive or medical equipment into the home only reinforces what they would prefer to forget. It is important to remember that in recommending the lifts, power chairs, and hospital beds, to name a few, the therapists are only looking out for the safety of the Veterans and caregivers. Falls and lifting injuries will negatively impact the quality of life for both you and your loved ones. We encourage you to take advantage of the appropriate services, equipment and technologies available to you.

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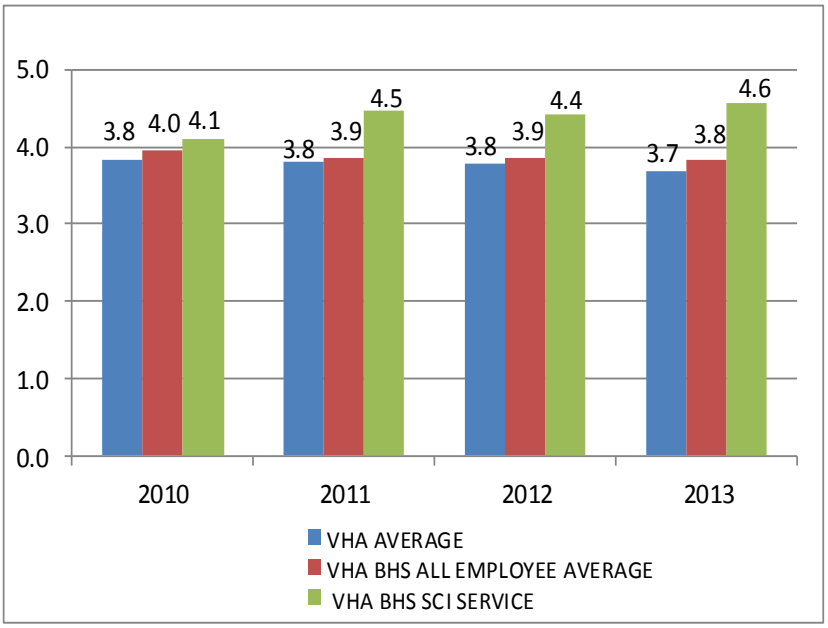
Excellence in Workforce

VA All Employee Survey
Overall Job Satisfaction
2010—2013



The VA All Employee Survey (AES) is administered annually to all VA employees (2013 administration in September). Satisfied staff translate to better patient care and satisfied patients. Perceptions of a high-performance work environment are associated with greater patient satisfaction and loyalty, greater workplace civility, employee engagement, and customer service. When employees feel supported and psychologically safe, they are more willing to admit and learn from mistakes.

The results of the VA All Employee Survey for 2013 again show that staff in the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Service at VA Boston report high satisfaction, with higher scores than the national average in every domain of the AES. The graph on the left shows scores for overall satisfaction, on a scale of 1-5, for the VA BHS SCI Service compared to national and facility average over the past four years.