

Development of care for those with spinal injuries in New Zealand

People with spinal cord injuries used to have a high mortality/morbidity from respiratory impairment to urinary infections and renal failure, and skin sepsis. They were often housed permanently in chronic geriatric wards, and nursing and medical care was very basic. Quality of life was very poor. This lecture will trace the enormous advances in understanding and care over the past 60 years or more that have occurred world-wide, and illustrated by what has happened in NZ, stimulated by Bill Utley and colleagues to the present day.

Key to these advances have been the embodiment of the Guttman principles with improved early orthopaedic intervention to achieve mobility, and independence. Attention to family and cultural aspects of life have been increasingly emphasised. A specialist workforce including medical, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and social workers, has developed. The incorporation of patients themselves in guiding research and in acting as mentors towards achieving the independent living paradigm, has been an important feature. Underpinning these advances is the assurance of financial support. In New Zealand since 1974 this has been funded by the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), and in other countries by legal processes.

The establishment of a national Spinal Reference Group, and more recently the NZ Spinal Injuries Registry aim to ensure the maintenance of standards throughout NZ. They will also enable documentation of outcomes while providing easy access to data for forward planning, and for patient information.