

EDITORIAL

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Communication and Medical Devices A Clarification



Let's begin with a few definitions. An *orthosis* is a support for a body part, usually external although not necessarily (e.g., wheelchair, AFO, crutch, etc.). A *prosthesis* is a replacement of a body part (e.g., leg, hand, foot, hip joint, eye, teeth, etc.). The National Science Foundation some years ago published a periodical called *Artificial Limbs*, an apt and historically correct title. Unfortunately, the Veteran's Administration (VA) opted for a single term, *prosthetics*, to be all inclusive, a circumstance further confusing communication and terminology.

Durable medical equipment is another item in rehabilitation (and indeed all of medicine) which needs definition. This term is limited to items of medical equipment which can be reused and transferred from individual to individual (e.g., bedpan, toilet seat, elevator, bathtub seat, hydraulic lifter, etc.).

My complaint is with the reimbursement agencies who tend to confuse orthotic devices with durable medical equipment. A classic example is calling the wheelchair durable medical equipment, completely neglecting the concept that a disabled person needs a unique mobility device adapted specifically to his or her unique impairment(s) and environment. This orthotic device is a liberating one, hence "confined to a wheelchair" and "wheelchair-bound" are phrases to be deplored.

While I can accept debate about crutches, canes, and walkers, my strong feeling is that these, too, are unique to a person's impairments, and thus are orthotic devices. Incidentally, since a crutch is defined in *Dorland's Medical Dictionary* as a device of wood or metal "ordinarily long enough to reach from armpit to ground" it would be an oxymoron to refer to "forearm crutches." Those are properly, modified canes.

The more controversial ambulation aids such as Warm Spring Crutches are improperly identified as crutches also, since they extend above the elbows but not to the axilla. Whatever!

The most important distinction must be between durable medical equipment, and orthotic devices, in order to *always* emphasize the uniqueness of the orthotic device for the disabled individual and on a written prescription!

Language being what it is, evolving, I may not be completely adamant about using the adjective as a noun, but it still annoys me and displeases my syntactic sensory cortex to hear orthotic used as a noun or prosthetics as a VA service. It doesn't sound right!

Maybe I am too sensitive, but I believe in communication as meaning what one says and saying what one means. After all is said and done, it took several years and many editorials to move universally from *orthetic* device to *orthotic* device.