

Electric wheelchairs

The good and the bad

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JANE SANDERS ILLUSTRATION

Her electric wheelchair was her downfall," says Cindy Braud, identifying herself as "Just Braud. I'm not one of those hyphenated women."

"My mother was more active and mobile on her own before she got it. She had a regular wheelchair for distances, but she moved around more on her own – cooking, walking and dusting around the house. It was an awful thing for her," laments Braud, gesturing to her nearby mother who nods her head in at least partial agreement.

"She would sit straight in the regular wheelchair, but now she shifts to her good side in an awkward posture. They gave her an electric headrest so she leans back and looks like a gangster. They are too comfortable, and patients become too dependent."

Lucy Braud suffered a stroke in 1997, leaving her left side partially paralyzed, but she doesn't consider herself an invalid. She is a very active 69-year-old who cooks up a storm, and her house is a favorite stop for family members and friends who yearn for her good cooking.

"Until I got the electric wheelchair, I could get around a little with a cane, but I have gone downhill. Being less mobile on my own made me gain 45 pounds the first year," the elder Braud sheepishly confides.

"I would go down the street to Winn Dixie in my electric wheelchair. Going up the ramp at home with all my groceries, I rolled off and broke my arm.

It is much harder to get around now. I can't use my arm as well for support. Maybe I would have been better off without getting that electric wheelchair in the first place.

"I saw this commercial on TV, called the number and got some papers in the mail. My doctor at Charity just signed a bunch of the papers, and I got my first electric wheelchair a few months before [Hurricane] Katrina. We evacuated to Houston without the chair. Since I was already certified, they gave me a new electric wheelchair in Houston." She continues, "When we came back to New Orleans, my old one in our house on Tchoupitoulas Street was still working. I also have an electric scooter that folds up for a car. That was a donation from the St. Henry's Church."

Braud's skepticism about electric wheelchairs isn't shared by Msgr. Henry H. Engelbrecht, who swears by his electric wheelchair. Father Henry was pastor at St. Henry's from 1990 until Archbishop Hughes shuttered the church last year.

Father Henry's problems began during his Jesuit High School days, where he sustained football injuries. Decades of kneeling, complicated by a nerve injury from a tight cast when he was in the seminary, compounded by impaired healing after surgery 15 years later left him with a bum right leg. He got around with just crutches for several years until developing hand weakness and pain from bilateral carpal tunnel complications. Since the mid-1990s, his key to continued mobility has been an electric wheelchair.

"I do Masses, weddings, funerals and hospital visits, all in my electric chair. It is easier to maneuver an electric wheelchair than one of those electric scooters that have much wider turning radiuses. My vehicle has an elevated ramp and I roll right in. After I drive home, I use crutches to get up some steps from my parking place to where I park another electric wheelchair for getting around my quarters. I tell people I park my crutches, not a broom, inside a closet at St. Rita's," says Father Henry.

While making hospital chaplaincy visits to patients at Ochsner-Baptist Medical Center last Good Friday, Father Henry quipped, "I don't need to do the Stations of the Cross. The archbishop already crucified me. He closed my church."

"Only once have I had an accident. I was in Dallas and went off the edge of the motel ramp, flipping myself over. I fractured my pride but no bones. You should have seen the blistering letter I wrote to Motel 6, but I have to give them credit. They replaced all their ramps with much safer ones. Motel 6 has the largest and nicest handicapped rooms of all the chains," says Father Henry as he rolls into another patient's room.

It is not unusual for family members to request motorized vehicles for persons with diminished mental capability who have no business operating one. Safety issues are important. According to a local physician, an elderly gentleman was attending his granddaughter's wedding on an electric scooter when he careened out the back door of the church, tumbling down several steps, sustaining multiple fractures and other injuries. He spent weeks in the hospital and months in rehabilitation.

Consumer advertising led to soaring sales of electric wheelchairs and scooters, but numerous allegations of Medicare fraud soon

followed. Medicare is no longer so quick to write a check for a benefit that skyrocketed to nearly \$750 million for one year. Practicing physicians still receive mailings from companies selling these devices spelling out the magic words Medicare needs to see before they write the check that covers up to 80 percent of a power-operated device with a sticker price up to \$5,000 or \$6,000 (see box).

Once obtained, some motorized mobility devices remain barely used at the most. An INVACARE power wheelchair was advertised for \$1,500 in a Times-Picayune Sunday classified listing. Taxpayers probably paid about \$4,000 for this “heavy duty, hardly used” electric wheelchair that a surviving relative is selling for \$1,500. This model had an original list price of more than \$6,000.

Used mobile scooters are cheaper. The same classified section listed a 3-wheel scooter which folds down for transportation for \$650. And a seller listed a “never used cherry red motorized Pronto 41 with sidestep – valued at \$6,600” on Craigslist.org for the bargain price of \$1,500 cash. The ad specified that the buyer must bring “a portable ramp to get it down three concrete stairs.”

In another Craigslist.org posting, prospective buyers were instructed to make an offer on a red “2007 Rascal 300 Electric Power Scooter [that] regularly costs \$5,700. Reason we are selling – Part of an Estate Sale.” And in Hammond a “like-new Heartway Bolero PF2 electric scooter” capable of carrying a 350-pound person 20 miles at a top speed of 6.3 miles per hour was selling for \$749 or any reasonable offer.

Electric scooters and wheelchairs are increasingly common on streets, despite state law prohibiting the use of power-operated vehicles on public roads unless there is an inspection sticker. I doubt you could get an electric scooter past the Causeway bridge police, but it would take a special kind of policeman to ticket a senior citizen on his or her way home from making groceries at a nearby Rouses.