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Challenges in the process of cross-border repatriation between South Africa and Malawi: a case study of two clients with spinal cord injury post rehabilitation at Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre

Robyn McGrath

Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre, Cape Town, South Africa

Providing long-term care for a person with spinal cord injury (SCI) can be complex, especially for clients with high lesions. For this reason, finding a suitable discharge environment post rehabilitation can be difficult: particularly for foreign clients whose families live far away. Repatriation comes with unique challenges that are clearly illustrated in two recent cases at Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre (WCRC). Due to limited social support, two Malawian clients were unable to be discharged post rehabilitation. Both had complete cervical SCI's and required considerable care. Assisted by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), both patients were repatriated back to Malawi.

The objectives of this case study are: to illustrate the complexities involved in cross border repatriation of clients with SCI post rehabilitation; to discuss challenges experienced by health care professionals in training caregivers in a limited space of time; and to consider implications for Occupational Therapy practice within SCI rehabilitation. The challenges experienced during the repatriation process led to the following questions: How can therapists working in rehabilitation better prepare their clients for reintegration into everyday life? Are families given enough time and support in coming to terms with the client's disability? And how can clients be supported more effectively in the transition from high to low resourced settings?

Facilitating the repatriation of clients with SCI across borders is complex. The challenges encountered highlight that family training and preparation for discharge are invaluable in determining the success of the process.