

Case study four: May Hall

May Hall is an 84 year old widow who lives on her own in a privately let flat. She is very sociable and likes to go out for coffee, meals and to visit friends and family. Whilst generally fit and healthy May has had surgery on both of her wrists to correct carpal tunnel syndrome. Unfortunately, this was not successful and she has limited grip. May also has familial tremor (essential tremor) and her hands shake badly, especially if she is feeling tired or stressed. She is incontinent of the bladder and likes to shower every day before breakfast to stay feeling clean and fresh. May has had an occupational therapy assessment and now has: a double handled mug, a trolley, a window opener, a sock aid, a reacher, handles in the shower, a shower step and a long-handled sponge.

Ali, a social worker, has picked up the case from a colleague, John, who has changed jobs, and is visiting May. May's two daughters Pat and Rene are also there. They support May to shower and dress every morning and help get her breakfast, leaving her to eat it. Both work full time and are finding it difficult to manage the daily visits although they really want to do as much as possible. May doesn't have any false teeth and tells Ali cleaning her teeth is really important as she is terrified of going to the dentist. She can't put toothpaste on her toothbrush because she needs two hands to squeeze the tube and the tremor in her hands means she gets toothpaste everywhere – she likes to clean her teeth after breakfast so her tea 'doesn't taste funny'. John's notes show that he was considering suggesting May have a half hour care visit every morning to enable her to have breakfast, a shower and clean her teeth.

Ali asks May, Pat and Rene about this plan. All think it would work but Pat and Rene are surprised as they have no issues with supporting May so many days per week. The main issue is May not being able to clean her teeth some days. They discuss this further and Pat suggests that on the days they support May they leave May's toothbrush ready with some toothpaste already on. The other days the carers could do it. May feels they could try this but thinks that maybe the paste would fall off her brush onto her clothes due to her tremor. Ali asks how May would feel about squeezing the toothpaste directly into her mouth instead of on to the brush. May thinks this would work as she can then use two hands to squeeze it instead of trying to get it on the brush. As a result of the discussion it is agreed that May would only need some support from carers three days per week instead of seven.

Ali then asks May how she is finding the equipment she has. May is not using any of the equipment apart from the shower step / handles and the window opener 'which everyone uses as the window is really awkward'. May says she doesn't use the cup because it is too small and she can't get enough tea in it, 'it's only half a cup and it goes cold before I've finished it', May explains some of the different reasons she is not able to use any of the other items too. Ali asks May if those are the only reason she isn't using any of them as they could make a big difference to May's independence and safety. May replies that she thinks the items emphasise what she can't do anymore. 'They mostly look like disability aids, a bit like what you would use in hospital, not nice things that everyone would use.'

Rene and Pat explain that when they go for coffee with Mum they just ask for her drink to be put in a larger size mug as her hands shake a bit. Most places they visit are more than happy to do this. Further discussion and some testing out about what the key things are that May would like to be able to do resulted in:

- A larger sized 'flowery' household mug which May can place on a side plate in case of spills. She will only part fill this and/or use a disposable straw – this replaced the two-handled mug
- A mason jar 'like you get cocktails in' with screw on lid and built in straw for cold drinks
- Soft grip top socks which May will have help to put on but can take off herself by pulling her foot backwards on the carpet whilst safely seated
- A blue shower puff on a long handle from a discount chemist which matches May's towels
- A battery operated tin opener and jar opener
- A shower cap so she didn't have to wash her hair every day