effect on patients’ decisions to use their orthopedic shoes and increases in the likelihood that patients follow up with their practitioners when they encounter problems, have their concerns addressed, and continue using their devices.²

The Importance of Function

Adherence is closely related to usability, which is “the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use,” according to van Netten et al.² Dijcks et al. report, not surprisingly, that “persons who stated that the problem their assistive device was provided for was (largely) solved, and persons who were satisfied with their device and the services, reported nonuse less frequently.”² This puts responsibility on the practitioner to perform a thorough assessment and provide a device that effectively meets each patient’s needs, as well as to foster a close relationship with the patient that allows for constructive strategies to address patient problems and complaints.²

Swinnen et al.’s published data relates to neurological patients’ acceptance of and satisfaction with their lower-limb orthoses—most of which were AFOs for patients post-stroke or with multiple sclerosis—and found patients’ perceived functional improvement as the main advantage and reason for continued device usage.² While participants in this study reported the lowest satisfaction in areas related to aesthetic concerns, less than one-fourth of the patients had negative comments about the visual aspects and the ability to hide their orthotic devices.² The researchers summarize that function and comfort were more important to patients than the aesthetic, design, and psychological aspects of an orthosis. “The majority of the patients would consider continuing using their OD [orthopedic device] even if the visual aspects were not good…if they felt disabled…or if they had the feeling that others saw them as disabled.”² van Netten et al.’s study on the use of orthopedic shoes found that “an improvement of walking was indicated as the most important factor of usability. The importance of other factors (cosmetic appearance and ease of use) was determined by reaching a compromise between these factors and an improvement of walking.”³ Artz et al.’s study of 153 patients with diabetes found that the determining factor for footwear use was “the perceived benefit of wearing prescription footwear at home.”³ They recommend “educating patients more effectively about the therapeutic value of custom-made footwear.”³

Conclusions

It is important to remember that “nonuse of assistive technology does not always indicate a problem.”² We do our best to make recommendations that are in our clients’ best interests and recognize that, as the end-users of the devices, they may have a better sense of what is necessary, manageable, useful, and appropriate. Their decisions do not occur in a vacuum and often involve complicated calculations about the roles the devices play in their lives.

Swinnen and Kerckhofs conclude in their 2015 systematic review that “if the walking function or mobility is not improved enough or if it is still possible to manage without them, this could lead to not using the assistive device.”³ Taking the time to listen, help clarify expectations, and provide clear instructions will allow us to distinguish between nonuse that is detrimental to the patient’s well-being and a use pattern that is simply different from our expectations and goals for the patient. These strategies will also help us address patient concerns more effectively and increase the likelihood that the device is used as designed and intended. O&P EDGE

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