



We found problems with the selling of mobility aids such as scooters



The Which? undercover operation revealed some disturbing findings

Taken for a ride

Our undercover operation shows that the sales techniques used by some mobility aids companies can be dangerous

Which? can reveal that some mobility aids companies are coercing people into buying expensive and unsuitable equipment without properly assessing their needs. Our investigation showed companies selling items such as scooters and adjustable beds using 'high-pressure' techniques and, in one case, even trying to help our investigator break the law.

Going undercover

During a two-week period in spring 2008, we carried out an undercover investigation into the techniques used to sell mobility equipment to people in their own homes.

We rented a property and secretly filmed sales reps trying to sell a variety of products to our 72-year-old undercover investigator, Yvonne Day (not her real name).

Our panel of experts provided Yvonne with a realistic scenario. She claimed to need equipment for herself and her husband, who had a long-term illness and was soon to be discharged from hospital.

We investigated 11 companies, six of which we chose because of negative feedback from you (the rest were selected from

sources where consumers could see them marketed). Yvonne asked each company to send a sales rep to show her certain mobility aids – adjustable beds, mobility scooters and bath lifts (see 'Our research', p25).

Code of conduct

In 2006, the British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA), the UK's largest healthcare association, published a code of practice which was meant to regulate how its member companies behave. Our experts used the code as a basis for our investigation as we believe that it sets out important criteria for protecting people.

With a quarter of you telling us that you or a relative own a mobility aid, we decided to test those companies which had signed up to the code, and those which hadn't.

We found more than half the companies didn't get the basics right, such as clearly identifying themselves – as the code stipulates. We also uncovered more sinister findings.

Lack of assessment

When someone is buying a mobility aid, it's vital that their needs are assessed correctly. As David Yelding from disability charity

Ricability warns: 'The wrong product could actually make their condition worse.'

Our experts were shocked by the failure of some companies to carry out an assessment, which is required by the BHTA code of practice. They thought that it was imperative for a sales rep to see Yvonne's husband before selling a product for his use. Only one company, Instant Mobility, asked to do this.

The salesman from Bath-Knight seemed oblivious when Yvonne told him that her husband had poor balance.

Senior trading standards officer Neil McLoughlin said: 'The salesman appeared to ignore Yvonne's statements that her husband would fall over. And he didn't seem to care that he had a more suitable product.'

Bath-Knight has disputed our findings and hasn't commented on this point.

Medical claims

Our experts were concerned that three of the four adjustable-bed companies made questionable medical claims, again breaching the BHTA code. Sun Mobility was the only one that didn't.

The Oakdale Beds sales rep told Yvonne that raising the head and foot of the bed would 'absolutely' stop her husband snoring. This is not backed by any evidence.

Oakdale Beds did not address this point directly but said that it does not consider

More than half the companies didn't get the basics right... and we uncovered more sinister findings

Contacts

Assessment advice

College of Occupational Therapists^a 0800 389 4873; www.cot.org.uk

Equipment advice

BHTA^a
020 7702 2141
www.bhta.com

Consumer Direct
0845 404 0506

Disabled Living Foundation Helpline^a
0845 130 9177
www.dlf.org.uk

Disabled Living Centres (Assist UK)
0870 770 2866
www.assist-uk.org

Forum of Mobility Centres
0800 559 3636

www.mobility-centres.org.uk

Motability
(route2mobility scooter scheme)
0845 607 6260
www.motability.co.uk

Radar^a The disability network
020 7250 4119 www.radar.org.uk

Ricability^a
(Research Institute for Consumer Affairs)
020 7427 2460
www.ricability.org.uk

Loan schemes

Shopmobility
0845 644 2446
www.shopmobilityuk.org

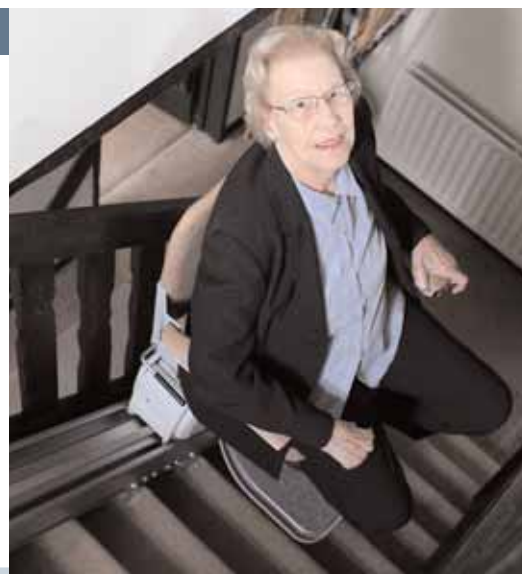
^a All produce useful guides and factsheets

POOR ASSESSMENT

Lily Everitt 90, retired

Lily told us that she was sold an unsuitable stairlift for £3,750. She says that her dealer, Contact for Electrical, didn't assess her properly. The Thyssen Flow stairlift juddered, so it was painful for Lily, who has severe arthritis.

Lily says the company knew she was registered as disabled, but didn't ask any questions to find out about her condition. She's now suing the dealer for selling an item unfit for purpose, following advice from Which? Legal Service. 'We thought stairlifts were a no-problem item,' said Lily's son, Roger. Contact for Electrical is defending the claim.



COMPANY	DETAILS			PERFORMANCE	
	ITEM BEING SOLD	AREA COVERED	BHTA MEMBER	OVERALL RATING	GOOD/BAD POINTS
INSTANT MOBILITY	Scooter	Eng/Scot/Wales	✗	Good	Good The only salesman to carry out a written assessment Bad Didn't fully explain some points, such as VAT relief
RAPLEY AND CO	Scooter	Surrey/W Sussex	✓	OK	Good Salesman pointed out pros and cons of product Bad Didn't carry out a thorough assessment
TOTALLY ACTIVE	Bath lift	Eng/Scot/Wales ^a	✓	OK	Good Salesman pointed out risks Bad Relied on Yvonne's information about her husband
SUN MOBILITY	Adjustable bed	Reading/local	✓	OK	Good Salesman demonstrated the bed realistically Bad He didn't know the prices of products
GBL WHEELCHAIR SERVICES LTD	Scooter	London/south-east	✓	OK	Good Salesman pointed out the risks Bad Refused to come into the house for further discussion
ALL HANDLING MOVABILITY LTD	Scooter/bath lift	London	✓	OK	Good Salesman enabled Yvonne to try out products safely Bad He offered a discount to get an immediate sale
NATIONWIDE MOBILITY	Bath lift	UK	✗	Poor	Good Salesman gave clear details of warranties/delivery times Bad He seemed displeased when Yvonne asked to consult Mr Day
ADJUSTAMATIC BEDS LTD	Adjustable bed	UK	✗	Poor	Good Salesman clearly identified himself on arrival Bad Made claims about the bed's medical benefits
BATH-KNIGHT	Bath lift	UK	✗	Poor	Good Salesman demonstrated the bath lifts clearly Bad Tried to sell Yvonne product even when she said Mr Day might fall
OAKDALE ADJUSTABLE BEDS	Adjustable bed	UK	✗	Poor	Good Salesman gave pricing information in writing Bad Oakdale wrote thanking her for placing an order she hadn't agreed to
CRAFTMATIC UK LTD	Adjustable bed	UK	✗	Poor	Good Salesman looked professional and smart Bad He phoned his manager twice to get Yvonne a 'discount'

^a Do not cover Scottish Islands

USING THE TABLE

Item being sold This is the mobility aid we invited the company to sell us. The company may sell others.

BHTA member A tick means that the company belongs to the British Healthcare Trades Association. Other

companies may belong to other trade organisations.
Overall rating Each company's performance was marked by an

independent panel using our checklist of criteria, which was weighted for importance, and then rated as a percentage.

OUR RESEARCH

Yvonne Day asked 11 companies to visit her to talk about certain mobility aids. They were unaware that she was working undercover for Which?. Five of the companies we invited are BHTA members.

Our experts comprised independent occupational therapist Maggie Winchcombe; Surrey County Council senior trading standards officer Neil McLoughlin and Gretel Jones from Age Concern. They assessed the companies on conduct, information, advice, assessment and sales tactics, using a checklist based on the BHTA's code of practice. Situation research was done without prior BHTA knowledge.

We also surveyed Which? online panel members about mobility aids in February 2008.

Poor: 0-54%; OK: 55-69%; Good: 70%+ **Good/bad points** We have chosen specific examples of good and bad practice.

itself a healthcare or mobility business but a bedroom furniture retailer.

The salesman from Adjustamatic Beds told Yvonne that most people who bought its beds with a massage system didn't need to go for physiotherapy and osteopathy any more. 'This is a ridiculous claim,' said occupational therapist Maggie Winchcombe. 'There's no way that a piece of machinery will be an alternative to a qualified person with specialist equipment.'

'To suggest they might cease professional treatments is wrong,' Adjustamatic said.



Being sold an adjustable bed

Pressure sales

Yvonne was also subjected to the hard sell. Five companies – Adjustamatic, All Handling Movability, Bath-Knight, Craftmatic, and Nationwide – offered discounts if she bought the product immediately, which the BHTA labels a 'high-pressure selling tactic' and has been illegal since 28 May 2008.

Craftmatic pushed for a deposit by telling Yvonne: 'It's not money. It's a cheque.' The company responded: 'We take great care to ensure that our representatives do not use "high-pressure" selling techniques.'

Yvonne also felt 'worried' by Oakdale Beds completing a sales agreement and asking for a cheque and her bank details, despite her insistence that she needed to talk to her husband. Our experts thought that this was bad practice.

'The home demonstration market has a very bad reputation,' Oakdale told us. 'We most certainly do not want to be seen as a company that operates in this manner.'

Sales plays

Alongside the hard sell, sales reps will employ other tactics to influence you. One is the use of 'expert opinion', as we found when Bath-Knight inaccurately boasted: 'When you get people like Age Concern recommending us, then you know you've arrived.' Age Concern told us: 'We certainly do not recommend any company.' Bath-Knight declined to comment.

And All Handling Movability's salesperson was even prepared to help Yvonne break the

law by lying to insurers if she caused an accident on her scooter. The salesman told her: 'We'd say to them ... "a child walked out of a gate and you had to swerve...and you clipped the gate", and they would say: "Get it fixed." They know it goes on. It's a little white lie.'

All Handling Movability said that it would not expect any member of staff to be involved in a fraudulent claim and will investigate it as a serious allegation.

The Craftmatic salesman told Yvonne that she would get a £500 catalogue voucher if she completed a 'sleep survey'.

One couple from Hampshire, Jacqueline and Desmond Adams, both 85, who bought a Craftmatic bed, sent us that catalogue. The items on offer bear no relation to mobility products. They include metal puzzles and a heated eyelash curler.

Mr Adams said: 'It's all rubbish. I'd probably have to spend £200 on their delivery charges to get the items sent to me.'

Buying

When it comes to buying the product, make sure you know the right price. Call the manufacturers or check the internet.

Yvonne was offered a 'Bubble' bath lift at prices from £495 by Totally Active Ltd to double that price from Nationwide Mobility. And two 0.9-metre (three foot) adjustable beds could have cost her from £2,698 (Sun Mobility) to £7,173 (Adjustamatic).

A scrupulous company should offer a fair price with no need for discounts – the BHTA calls this a sales tactic. Six of the 11 companies discounted the original price during the visit, or threw in freebies such as headboards and even laptop computers.

Which? says

We are appalled to see such poor practice in an industry that sells expensive products to potentially vulnerable people. The industry needs to show that it takes its self-regulatory role seriously.

The BHTA seems to be heading in the right direction. But it needs to engage with non-members and increase sign-up to its code of practice, monitor compliance and take effective action against bad practice.

We need the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) – which supervises these codes – to ensure that standards do improve. We have sent our findings to trade bodies and the OFT.

Following our investigation, seven of the 11 companies have committed to take action, including GBL, which is carrying out a full staff retraining programme on the code.

Questions answered

What are your rights when buying mobility aids?

Q How can I get help with choosing the right product?

A You can be assessed by an occupational therapist (OT). Contact an OT through your local council social services department (health and social care trust in Northern Ireland). In England, the government is proposing a system whereby, if you are eligible for state support, you will get an equipment 'prescription' from an OT and will be able to choose an accredited supplier. Some areas have started this already. You can also organise a private OT yourself.

Q Can I get my equipment free or can I get help with paying for it?

A If you are assessed as needing a piece of equipment that your council or trust provides, and meet their eligibility criteria, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland it may be loaned free of charge. In Scotland equipment is loaned free of charge by most councils. An OT can also advise on whether you can get a Disabled Facilities Grant towards adapting your home.

Q What are my legal rights when I buy in a shop or online?

A If you buy in a shop, you don't always have the right to return – check the seller's policy. But goods must be fit for purpose – get the shop to confirm in writing that your product does what you need it to. If you order online, you can cancel up to seven working days from the day after you receive your goods. Goods cannot be returned if they are tailor-made. Always check terms and conditions.

Q And what if a salesperson visits my home?

A If you buy a product through an unsolicited visit, you have seven days to cancel. If you invited the visit, you have no right to cancel unless you agreed to discuss one product and you were sold something completely different. However, new regulations giving a seven-day cooling-off period are proposed from 1 October 2008. The new Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 outlaw certain practices, such as pressure selling. Talk to Consumer Direct if you experience bad practice.

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Your checklist to buying mobility aids safely

If you're looking for a worry-free experience when buying mobility aids from adjustable beds to stairlifts, read on

General advice

Assessment Whether contacting your local council, a mobility centre or a private company, you should have a good assessment of your needs to help you find the right product (see 'Contacts', p25).

BHTA Some companies have signed up to the BHTA code but that isn't always a guarantee of good practice (see table, p25). Two companies told us they would not sign up to the BHTA's code of practice because they don't agree with it. But the BHTA said: 'There are companies that won't sign our code of practice because they're out to persuade people in a way that we don't find

The future If your mobility is likely to deteriorate, buy an aid with the long term in mind.

Be sure When equipment is delivered, don't let the company leave until you're sure you know how to use it. Read the user manual.

Beware the net Shop around for prices, but



remember that cheaper internet sales won't include a trial and may not include aftercare.

Cards Paying by credit card for items for yourself between £100 and £30,000 can make the credit card company liable for any breach of contract.

No VAT Certain aids and equipment designed for use by disabled people are zero-rated. This means they are not subject to VAT.

Guarantees Check what guarantees cover, and the speed of response to callouts – however, you still have normal rights under the Sales of Goods Act. Budget for when your guarantee runs out and for insurance. Mechanical items need servicing, and insurers may require you to maintain them regularly.

Adjustable bed

Getting it right Make sure that any bed is the right height for you to get in and out of, and that it's possible for someone to assist you, if needed. Check the use of controls and that the bed can be plugged in and used safely and that there are no tripping hazards, such as cables.

Extras Always try beds before buying. Consider advice from a health professional such as an OT. Some extras, such as a massage unit, may help a condition such as arthritis, but they could also aggravate it. (See 'Therapy makes problem "much worse"', p82).

Making room Check that you have enough room to manoeuvre round the bed, and that old beds will be taken away.

Bath lift

Choice There's a range of lifting equipment on offer, including chair lifts, belts across the bath and inflatable cushions. Try products to see which one best suits your needs.

Damage The design of your bath and bathroom is important. The wrong equipment may damage your bath.



Lifestyle If there's more than one person using the bath, consider whether someone can move the bath lift in or out of the tub.

Scooter

Comfort and safety The BHTA says that your choice will depend on factors like 'your weight, size and height, weight of chair for lifting and quality of roads in your area.'

Scooter or wheelchair? Scooters are not substitutes for wheelchairs, and they do not offer the same back support or seating and cushions. You need to be sure you can use the steering mechanism easily and without aggravating any disability. Mobility centres can advise (see 'Contacts', p25).

Your needs Scooters can have three or four wheels and can range from very small, portable models up to large vehicles that can



handle rough terrain. Ask how long the scooter can run before the battery needs charging, but remember that factors such as heavy loads or gradients reduce this time.

One for the road? There are two types: Class 2 or 'pavement' vehicles, with a maximum speed of 4mph, and larger or Class 3 vehicles, which can go up to 8mph. The latter need to be DVLA-registered and have a nil-duty tax disk.

Storage and charging

Scooters need to be charged and stored between uses.



Stairlift

Suitability It needs to be suitable for you and your home. You will have less choice if you have a curved or unusually shaped staircase. Very steep stairs, ones which turn at the top, and doorways close to stairs, can cause problems.

Safe installation Make sure that stairlifts are fitted by professionals.

Removal Stairlifts can be expensive to remove. Check whether the company has a solid buy-back policy and get this in writing.



ethically acceptable. We're trying to get the industry to pull its own socks up and to train staff – that's the challenge we face.'

Right place, right time

Test the product as thoroughly as you can in the environment where it will be used. Ask to take it home for a trial period.

Invite a friend Think about having someone with you for support.

Take care Check what day-to-day maintenance and servicing is recommended.