

## Head Positioning: Problems or Possibilities?

Kathryn Fisher B.Sc.(OT), ATP  
Filipe Monforte Correia

Positioning of the head can provide challenges to clinicians developing seating and mobility solutions. As the head represents each individual's personality its position influences social contacts. It is vital then that we attempt to position each client's heads for optimal social interaction.

Goals for head positioning must be realistic and attainable. Although we are often called to just "solve the problem with a client's head" no head positioning system will "fix" seating issues! Head support is an integral part of a seating system. It is far more than just an accessory.

In order to successfully position the head a comprehensive seating assessment must be performed. It is imperative that the positioning of pelvis, lower extremities and trunk be addressed before attempting to position the head.

A full MAT assessment is essential to determine the degree of head support required. This must include:

- Lateral flexion and rotation of the trunk and pelvis
- Tonal patterns
- Tolerance of contact and pressure
- Muscle Strength/weakness
- Amount of force required to accommodate/correct posture

During this assessment it should also be determined how much support your client will tolerate as well as caregiving support required to maintain proper positioning using the prescribed equipment. In some situations aggressive head positioning equipment may be sacrificed to achieve consistency of use or positioning.

During the assessment it is essential to simulate the head position with your hands. This is the best way to assess the forces necessary to obtain head positioning goals. The direction and amount of force required can be felt as you correct the head position. It is important to feel the client's reaction, active movement and resistance to changes in position to determine tolerance of the desired position.

In designing the head support solution consider the client's head size and shape and surface area available for pressure distribution. There are obvious areas to be avoided with direct pressure

- Temporal area and eyes
- Ears
- Mastoid process
- Mandible

Areas to focus on support

- Occiput – cradle as much as possible
- Flat areas on the side of head and forehead - ensure consistency of placement of supports

Once the assessment is complete selection of components and simulation of the system is an essential part of the process. It is important to select products to mimic the forces and shapes of your hands during the assessment.

Consideration of head support systems may include:

- Occipital and suboccipital support pads
- Lateral, posterior and in some cases anterior supports
- Lateral and rotational accommodation
- Dynamic or static supports

It is important to consider ease of use of the system for client transfers, repositioning and caregiving. It is essential to provide education as to proper use of the system, proper positioning of the client in the system and ongoing care and cleaning as the products are near to the client's face.

This session will explore strategies to for head positioning using case studies to illustrate the assessment, trial and seating prescription process.

Learning Objectives:

**1. Participants will review and understand basic principles of seating**

**2. Participants will be presented with potential challenges in head positioning**

**3. Participants will develop strategies for successful postural and head positioning solutions**

**4. Participants will review head support components to develop head positioning solutions**