



Easy wheels

An affordable electric wheelchair will soon be available in India for people with disabilities

SHREYA SAREEN

AN ELECTRIC wheelchair that's made in India and is affordable is an idea whose time is nearing. An ongoing project at the Indian Spinal Injuries will soon be ready with such wheelchairs.

Head of Department of Assistive Technology at the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC) Nekram Upadhyay, who has been working on it, says, "The project is in its final stages. We have tied up with the University of Pittsburgh."

A successful trial has already been held in India. "So now, on the basis of technology transfer from the US and their approval, it will be finally tested. Then, with the help of a manufacturer, we'll market it," says 34-year-old Upadhyay, who is also a rehabilitation engineering technol-

But I couldn't find many options in India," he says.

Things looked up for him when he got a Ford Foundation scholarship and went to the University of Illinois in 2004 to pursue a post-graduate degree in rehabilitation engineering and assistive technology. "While doing my research thesis there, I discussed with my advisor how there were no departments for such fields in India and he advised me to send a proposal to the ISIC. Luckily, they accepted it and gave me the freedom and space to build my own department here," he says.

His task involves counselling patients and providing wheelchairs — manual and automatic — and other customised devices to enable them to perform their tasks. He also provides specialised computer equipment and software, such

“There is no such wheelchair available in India yet. The electric ones are imported from abroad and are available Rs 1,00,000 onwards, which is unaffordable for a lot of people”

Department since its inception in 2006.

The wheelchair, which will cost Rs 30,000, is designed in such a way that it can be used in rugged terrains and in rural areas as well.

“There is no such wheelchair available in India yet. The electric ones are imported from abroad and they are available Rs 1,00,000 onwards, which becomes unaffordable for a lot of people,” says Upadhyay.

Upadhyay, along with a team, is involved in designing assistive devices for people who are affected by spinal cord injury to help them become independent.

Upadhyay belongs to Jaipur, and studied Product Design from Rajasthan University. “After that, I worked from 1999-2003 at an NGO — the Indian Council of Social Welfare — where I was an accessibility expert. I used to work there for the disabled and it was then that I decided I wanted to explore this field, and started looking for professional courses in this area.