they will require. Once all their needs are assessed, they can begin looking for the right chair. If needed, occupational therapists can help them choose the wheelchair that is the most appropriate for their particular lifestyle.

**Manual Wheelchairs**

Thirty years ago, wheelchair options were limited, to say the least. They were all approximately the same size and looked about the same: a heavy, bulky, stainless steel chair with black or dark green upholstery. Today’s wheelchairs are sleek, lightweight and available in a vast array of styles, colors and options. In addition, the newest wheelchair frames are available in stainless steel, chrome, aluminum, airplane aluminum, steel tubing, titanium, and an alloy of chrome and lightweight materials. The lighter weight of some of these materials produces a lighter chair overall, making mobility easier.

**Lightweight, Ultralight and Sports Chairs**

Lightweight, ultralight and sports chairs are currently the most popular kind of wheelchair for everyday use. Though originally designed for use in athletics, the lighter weight construction (generally between 12 and 45 pounds) of these chairs provides advantages for nonathletes and everyday use as well. As manual wheelchairs, they are recommended for those who have good upper-body strength. These wheelchairs require less effort to propel than standard wheelchairs, and they have a sportier look that many people prefer. A prime example, Invacare’s Top End Terminator Titanium, a custom-built chair with an adjustable center of gravity, is based on the design of the company’s Top End Terminator sport chairs, but is suitable for everyday use. Eagle Sportschairs also makes a wide variety of custom wheelchairs for use in athletics such as racing, basketball, quad rugby, tennis and field events.

**Standard Chairs**

Standard wheelchairs are characterized by a cross-bar frame (enabling the chair to fold for transportation or storage), built-in or removable armrests, swing-away footrests, a mid- to high-level back and push handles. These wheelchairs are most suitable for users who are not extremely active and do not require the features of the lightweight or sports chairs. In addition, standard wheelchairs tend to be less expensive than the lightweight ones.

**Chairs for Children**

When choosing a wheelchair for a child, there are even more considerations. Adjustability is important because children’s bodies change so quickly as they grow, and they need a wheelchair that will change with them. Replacing a wheelchair every year or so is not only...
inconvenient, but also very expensive. Also important to children is the appearance of the wheelchair. With the constant battle of trying to fit in with their peers, children look for a chair with style and an overall “cool” appearance. Many companies produce stylish-looking wheelchairs that can be modified to adapt to growing children. Sunrise Medical manufactures the Zippie line of pediatric wheelchairs, and its newest model, Zippie TS, has a new look. Like other Zippie models, it features a wide variety of accessories, options and colors, but now it folds for easy transportation and storage. The Sting, by ETAC USA, is a children’s wheelchair that has an adjustable seat, footrests and backrest to ensure comfort, control and correct posture as the child grows. A machine-washable seat cover provides added comfort and convenience. In the design of the Little Dipper, Colours in Motion tried to create a sleek, compact and comfortable wheelchair that is stylish and promotes self-confidence for its smaller users. The chair adjusts as the child grows and can be set up for sports or everyday use.

First-time or Temporary Chairs
When purchasing a wheelchair for the first time, some people may want to choose one that can be adjusted as they learn to use and become more familiar with it. The Avenger, by Colours in Motion, is designed to help people learn to adjust to using a wheelchair. As users become more familiar with the chair and how it will fit into their lifestyles, they can modify it to suit their own needs. The front and rear seating position, backrest height and rear axle positioning are all adjustable for an individualized fit.

For some people, rehabilitation or need assessment can be time-consuming. In the meantime, they need a simple, cost-effective wheelchair. They don’t need exhaustive lists of options and features from which to choose, and they don’t want to spend a lot of money on a wheelchair they won’t use for long. The Twin, by ETAC USA, is made for exactly this purpose. Though it fits the style of the company’s other chairs, it is more basic and less expensive.

Powered Chairs
Powered wheelchairs are similar to manual wheelchairs in function and comfort, but there are some key differences. Powered wheelchairs require very little body energy to operate and are generally for people who have little upper-body strength, are extremely mobile and tire easily, or cover long distances. Basic components of the chairs are similar to those of manual chairs, with the addition of controllers, batteries and drive systems, which make the chair heavier and more expensive.

Specialty Chairs
Wheelchair companies now offer chairs that are specialized for different kinds of users and different needs. Otto Bock Health Care customizes wheelchairs to suit any unique need through modified frames, special seat widths and depths, back angle adjustments, customized cushions, and equipment for driving with one arm. Everest and Jennings, Inc., manufactures the Premier Amputee Wheelchair, a folding, manual wheelchair designed for lower-limb amputees. Its rear wheels are set back to compensate for weight transfer and to maintain chair balance, and it does not include footrests, which are unnecessary for lower-limb amputees and add excessive weight. Gendron, Inc., manufactures one-arm drive wheelchairs for individuals to propel the chair from the left or the right side and customized balance adjustments for amputees (because amputees – especially lower-limb amputees – have a different center of gravity than other wheelchair users). And, the Regency XL 2000 Series can accommodate users who weigh up to 700 pounds.

Specialty Chairs
Nature lovers may opt for an all-terrain wheelchair that can be used almost anywhere. Natural Access manufactures the Landeez all-terrain wheelchair, which is easily portable and can roll over sand, snow, gravel, soft soils and lightly packed snow. Special wheels can also be added to create an all-terrain chair. Roleez wheels, by Roleez Wheels, Inc., can be added to wheelchairs and are designed to disperse loads over large surface areas for an easy roll over all types of terrain, including soft sand, mud, uneven ground, bumps, stairs and curbs. Other companies manufacture wheelchairs to ease everyday tasks. The Rehab Shower/Commode chair, by Everest & Jennings, Inc., is designed to give the wheelchair user unlimited access to toilets and showers. Its padded seat and plastic-coated handrims provide support, grip and easy transfer while in wet conditions. Additional features include seat cutouts (providing easy access to toilets), swing-away footrests, a corrosion-resistant frame, side panels, and a water-resistant, foam seat.
Options
Most wheelchairs can be specialized to suit the individual needs of each user. A manual wheelchair can even be converted to a motorized wheelchair if the user’s needs change. For added safety, a wheelchair can include chest straps, shoulder harnesses, lap belts, anti-tippers (to prevent tipping forward or backward), hill climbers (to allow the chair to move forward without rolling backward), wheel locks, and foot and leg straps. For added comfort, options include armrest panels and clothing guards. For added convenience, options include airless tire inserts (to reduce the amount of flat tires), quick-release axle pins (to change wheels without tools), seat pouches or webbed cradles (for storage), and travel wheels (to aid in moving through narrow doors or down airplane aisles). Of course, different chairs feature different options, so conducting research and talking to an occupational or physical therapist are useful in finding the most suitable chair.

Cost and Funding Sources
Wheelchairs can be an expensive investment, but the cost depends on what type of chair and which options are chosen. A manual chair generally costs between $500 (the kind you find for use in shopping malls or at rest homes) and $4,000 (a “loaded” customized lightweight chair), and most lightweight chairs cost between $1,800 and $2,800. Powered chairs can cost between $3,500 (the most basic) and $20,000, and most with moderate special adaptations start at a little less than $12,000.

The amount of financial assistance a wheelchair user receives depends on his or her income, medical insurance, eligibility for medical and social services, and vocational assistance. Therefore, the actual out-of-pocket expense varies from person to person; but there certainly is funding out there.

Today’s Wheelchairs
In just 30 years, we have seen remarkable advancements in wheelchairs. They are now available with custom options to suit almost any unique need. The style, comfort and security of today’s wheelchairs were unheard of just three decades ago, and they keep getting better. When people do not have the use of their legs anymore, at least they can now roll in style and comfort with confidence.

Companies mentioned in this article:
Colours in Motion
800/892-8998
www.colourswheelchair.com
Eagle Sportschairs
800/932-9380
www.eaglesportschairs.com
ETAC USA
Distributed in the U.S. by Snug Seat, Inc.
800/336-7684
www.snugseat.com
Everest & Jennings, Inc.
800/347-5678
www.everestjennings.com
Gendron, Inc.
800/537-2521
www.gendroninc.com
Invacare Corporation
800/333-6900
www.invacare.com
Natural Access
800/411-7789
www.natural-access.com
or www.landeez.com
Otto Bock Health Care
800/328-4058
www.healthcare.ottobock.com
Roleez Wheels, Inc.
800/369-1390
www.roleez.com
Sunrise Medical
888/333-2572
www.sunrisemedical.com