

Improved Airport Security

More Problems For People With Prostheses



by Christina DiMartino

When Representative John D. Dingell (D-MI) was stopped by airport security before boarding an airplane in early January, he immediately knew why. Fitted with an artificial hip 20 years ago, Dingell was accustomed to setting off security alarms. Even after removing his overcoat, suit jacket, shoes and socks, the metal detector still beeped its warning. That he was a congressman didn't influence - or impress - security guards. He was escorted to a private room and asked to remove his pants. Only then was he given approval to board the plane.

A spokesperson from Dingell's office later stated that the congressman didn't mind the "show and tell" proof, but that this incident proves airport security officials are treating everyone with equal diligence. And after September 11, it's strictly a matter of security.

Post-September 11 - A New Way Of Traveling

If Dingell's hip replacement set off metal detectors, it's easy to understand that

prostheses do also. But people with amputations are accustomed to having to explain themselves at airport security. It's just that with increased security following the terrorist attacks of last year, it may take more of an effort to convince guards that you're not a terrorist. For the thousands of people who wear prostheses, the new security regulations can be extremely troublesome, time-consuming, frustrating and even embarrassing. "Being told to remove your shoes is difficult at best for those who wear a prosthetic leg. But for some it's impossible," says Paddy Rossbach, ACA president and CEO. Rossbach has a below-knee amputation. "For me it's easier to take the entire leg off, hand it to them and let them run it through the x-ray scanner. People with an above-knee prosthesis can't take their leg off so easily. They often have to undress to remove it."

Rossbach's position with the ACA, and her involvement in its many aspects, requires her to travel regularly. She says it's always a different scenario, and she never knows what she'll face next. "There is no consistency from one airport to the next - and little between

security guards even at the same airport," she says. "It's important to dress so it's easy to do whatever you're asked, carry all the identification you can and give yourself plenty of time before your flight in case you do run into a snag. We all appreciate feeling safer on flights - but it has meant an increased burden for people with disabilities."

Rossbach often takes groups of children with amputations on field trips - some of them far enough away to require airline travel. She has cancelled all trips that require flying since September 11. "We had an annual trip planned for the first week of December," she says. "We were taking 14 children to the Sports Ability Games of the Junior Orange Bowl in Miami. Besides the potential problems involved in getting so many kids through security with their prostheses, I also felt increased responsibility for their safety. Although we're saddened over having to cancel this trip, we're happy knowing these children are all safe. Our trips, for the time being at least, will be limited to places we can drive to."

Check In With Your Luggage And Your Body Language

Becky Bruce, outreach information specialist for the ACA in Knoxville, Tennessee, wears two prostheses. Her left leg was amputated below the knee, and she had a Symes amputation at her right ankle. She says how you carry yourself has a lot to do with what you'll face at airport security checkpoints.

"I wear a lot of metal," Bruce says. "It's easier for me to wear skirts rather than trousers. Then all I have to do is lift my skirt an inch to show guards my prostheses. But I also think how you deal with people determines how they, in

turn, deal with you. If you communicate clearly, then ask them what they would like you to do to prove your disability, they'll usually go through the process gracefully and without causing you undue stress. Most people, however, feel intimidated about their prostheses, and hate having attention drawn to them. I once had a guard feel around my prosthetic suspension sleeve, but most people get distraught before they get to that point. I just let the guard know that it didn't bother me, and to do whatever was necessary."

Bruce says she gets phone calls frequently from people who have had bad experiences at airports asking for her advice. "I tell people to wear loose clothing and be upfront about their prosthesis," she says. "Surprisingly, some guards don't even know what the word 'prosthesis' means - so you have to watch your vernacular as well. They understand 'artificial leg or arm,' so that's the term you have to use when explaining it to them."

Bruce says she has had her prosthetic

leg and suspension sleeve patted down and then walked through the scanner carrying a cup of cappuccino. "How did they know there wasn't a bomb in the bottom of my cup?" she questions. "There isn't consistency at security checkpoints yet, and until there is there won't be consistency in the rules we have to apply to ourselves to make air travel easier."

Bruce also suggests people contact airport security before making a reservation to tell them about their prosthesis and find out what they can do to avoid a "breakdown" during the security check. "Security guards tend to overreact since September 11," she adds. "They're afraid of losing their jobs. Their increased diligence means people who wear prostheses have to be more diligent in preparing for the unexpected."

To Preserve The Civil Rights Of People With Disabilities

The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) and the Department of Transportation's rules prohibit discriminatory treatment

of people with disabilities in air transportation. Since the tragic events of September 11, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has issued directives to strengthen security measures at airline checkpoints and passenger screening locations. In securing the national air transportation system, where much of the FAA's efforts have been directed, steps were also taken to ensure that the new procedures preserve and respect the civil rights of passengers with disabilities. The FAA's Fact Sheet provides information about the accessibility requirements in air travel in light of strengthened security measures by providing a few examples of the types of accommodations and services that must be provided to passengers with disabilities. The Air Carrier Access Act can be viewed online at: www.epva.org/Disability_Issues/airaccess.html ■