

Disability with style

By MICHAEL KOPP

You've had a stroke, a paralyzing injury or illness of some sort, and you can no longer do some simple things for yourself, like putting on your shirt or blouse.

And you're devastated. Even with help, your arms are hard to get into garments, bruise easily, and hurt. You get stuck halfway dressed.

You can no longer wear nice things. You don't want to go anywhere. Or you have to care for someone in this position. Either way, you're frustrated, angry and depressed.

Sally Keenan spent 25 years as a nurse, working with people trapped in this dilemma. She wanted desperately to help them.

But special clothing for people with restricted movement or disabilities was hard to find or had to be imported. And when it could be found, it looked about as stylish as hospital garb.

"Your self-esteem drops enough with a disability like stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's or tetraplegia [partial upper body paralysis]," says the Paremata resident.

On her own Ms Keenan kept wondering how to design garments with easy openings and fastenings.

"I so much wanted to give these people back some fashionable, functional garments to make them feel better about themselves again, to give them something normal again."

Working in hospitals, rest homes and with individuals, Ms Keenan tried to let people do as much by themselves as possible. But many people would get stuck halfway into

something like a jersey – trapped inside a suffocating, dark hole. There were no alternatives, she says, no special 'adaptive', or 'restricted movement' garments available in New Zealand.

"It is just so hard for them to get dressed. Coping with a disability is bad enough without having to cope with this stress and pain."

One day she had a revelation, and saw in her mind how to make upper body garments so they could be easily put on for disabled people – a one-piece garment that could be wrapped around a disabled person, much like a stole, and going through a 'tunnel'.

So she calls it a "Tunstole", and it's so unique a design she's applied for a New Zealand patent for it – and we can't show exactly how it works. When put on, the garments look just like normal clothing.

The upper garment, which can be made in a number of styles, including very dressy or just casual, can be put on easily by a caregiver. It works for both women's and men's designs.

A hobbyist sewer, Ms Keenan was not a designer, but had over the years created enough clothing for herself and friends. It was a natural career progression for her, she says, to help people in better ways.

"I knew what I wanted to achieve. I experimented for a year on my kitchen table. Then one day it just came to me."

In June 2005, she started casting about for a way to get the garment made in quantity and sell it as a business. But by itself it wouldn't support a business. She needed to learn about the 'rag trade'. Then she heard



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Sally Keenan.

that a business making lycra dance garments, Slyx, was for sale. She bought the business, and, after three-and-a-half years, she says, "I feel I've just scratched the surface".

Ms Keenan says she took the gamble "purely on faith in the need for restricted movement garments".

Developing her idea – with some air of secrecy, as with most inventors of a new idea – she says, "I spent six months sewing lycra dance wear at work – and experimental versions of my idea on the dining room table at home".

She designed "fashionable, functional" dresses, shirts and nighties. They're made of easily washable, non-shrink cotton and polyester-lycra blends, and special closures. She says she especially wanted to use high-fashion fabrics instead of just utility grade cotton.

She made many samples and tried them out with patients in a local rest home that was happy to help in the search for a solution. "The trial showed people's lives changed overnight. Getting dressed was no

longer a struggle. It gave them back their dignity."

Ms Keenan searched the country to make sure her idea was original and found no-one else was doing anything like this here. Someone in the Wairarapa was making a sort of adaptive undergarment, nothing like her idea. Her concept seemed different to other 'adaptive' clothing overseas.

Now, with trials finished, final designs in place, and a business model and website set up, she needed a name for the new venture. "Everyone names their clothing line after themselves," she says, "but I'm not really a fashion designer with that kind of kudos."

She chose her brother's name – he died in 1981 – and called it the David Lindsay Restricted Movement Clothing Collection.

She's been busy showing the collection to practice nurses, and with the patent application in, she's going public. She's taken on a marketing specialist, Cheryl Robertson. The business, including Slyx, will operate from the web and her home. The range includes underwear at about \$40, shirts at \$90, tops at \$160, dresses at \$230, and full dress jackets at \$369.



Above, Jackie Bevan of Raumati wearing a 'tunstole' dress with a bead accessory.

Top, Pam Sutherland and Laurie Turnbull of Camborne. Pam wears a 'tunstole' high-neck jersey with bead accessory and wrap-around skirt, and Laurie wears a pull-on polo shirt and 'tunstole' jacket.

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