

It's no laughing matter

By: Colleen Maloney

Hysterically funny! These are the words many of us have used to describe cartoons depicting someone stuck on a low-rise toilet seat in a public washroom. In fact, most people do find it funny. Careers have been built on it. Calendar and greeting card designers make big bucks selling "potty" humour. Teens love it. Joke shops market the gallows graphics to everyone under 21 and over 55. Even medical labs post the irreverent images to entertain and distract their clients. But when the table turns, and it's us or someone we care about stuck in a public washroom, it's no laughing matter.

We grumble about it to friends and family. Sometimes, depending on our sense of humour, we may regale people at cocktail parties describing how we persuaded a complete stranger to come into the cubicle and lift us up. Seldom do we take it any further.

Helen O'Grady isn't like that. When she found herself in a similar situation in a washroom cubicle marked handicapped at the Ottawa International Airport last June, she complained. And the airport authority acted.

Ms O'Grady has rheumatoid arthritis and has had both her hips and knees replaced. She found the toilet in the handicapped washroom too low and took her complaint to the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA). They checked it out and were advised by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) that high rise toilets for people with disabilities must be between 400 and 460 mm high.

According to Globe and Mail reporter, Paul Waldie, the Ottawa International Airport authority has spent the past six months consulting a team of building code experts on how high toilets must be. As a result of Ms O'Grady's complaint a massive probe was launched at the new terminal. Twenty-two washrooms were surveyed and 64 toilets for the disabled were measured. Six failed to pass the grade – all were too low.

Ms. O'Grady is pleased at the airport's effort, reports Mr. Waldie, "but she recommended the CSA standard be increased to 533 mm to accommodate the aging population. Building officials "should look at the entire population of individuals with special needs, both disabled and elderly", she says.

Of course Ms O'Grady is right. But she has only scratched the surface of problems encountered by travelers. While CSA officials are studying those barriers to traveling, they should consider inviting a broad range of people with disabilities to help with the investigation. Come to think of it, CTA should look at the complete inventory of inconveniences experienced by all travelers. At the top of my list is the personal exposure and indignity I encounter getting the *public* "pat down" going through airport security because of my artificial joints. What's at the top of your list?