

The Adventures of Traveling With a Vent

Elaine M. Burns, Boston, Massachusetts

Traveling with a vent? No problem! I had done so successfully for over twenty years. I had a backup plan, should something stop working: I carried the phone number of the vent manufacturer I used. I had dealt with their customer service and repair departments and they were always helpful. Unfortunately, having their contact information did me very little good when a problem occurred when traveling 3,000 miles from home.

First, some background information. I had polio as a child and now am probably dealing with the late effects of polio and/or aging. I had used a volume ventilator for more than twenty years to keep my lungs clear of carbon dioxide when sleeping. I have had a series of ventilators, most of them heavy and awkward to transport.

When I was dating my future husband, although he enjoyed traveling as much as I did, he didn't enjoy lugging my PLV®-100 vent around or lifting it into the airplanes' overhead compartment. Then, Pulmonetic Systems (now CareFusion) introduced a compact vent, the LTV®900 series. Insurance was not going to pay for it, so we bought it outright from a dealer. This vent was fabulous for travel, much lighter and more compact. The problem was that although we bought it from a certified Pulmonetic dealer, he didn't continue to be one, leaving us on our own since Pulmonetic Systems, in most cases, would not deal with us. Fortunately, I do have a home health respiratory company, and they had it serviced for me.

I have always been blessed with travel opportunities, and along with my new vent, off I went. I made sure that I had the appropriate phone numbers with me, in case there was a problem. When I went to Europe, I had the phone numbers of contacts for each city. No problem, I thought.

Last June, we traveled to a wedding two hours north of San Francisco. On a Saturday morning I awoke to my vent malfunctioning. It would alarm, but stop when the reset button was pushed, then alarm again later. Using my Pulmonetic Systems contact numbers, I left a phone message and a repair person quickly returned my call. No, he had never heard of the problem that I was experiencing, and no, they could not provide me with another machine. Since the machine was undiagnosable, I had no idea how long it would continue to work, with intermittent alarming.

I called my home health respiratory company and the owner responded quickly. He and my respiratory therapist made many calls attempting to locate a company that would loan me a vent, but they were not successful. There was nothing to do but cut our trip short and return home immediately after the wedding. Fortunately the ventilator never stopped working. Once at home, I switched to my backup vent, and the malfunctioning vent was immediately shipped off to the manufacturer for repair.

This was quite a learning experience for me. The first lesson was that I should always travel with a copy of my prescription, with the settings for my vent. This is true for a volume vent, BiPAP or CPAP. I carried the vent settings for a medical emergency, but I didn't have an official prescription. Without a prescription, no one would loan me a vent even if they had one. I now do this. Second, my home health company



Elaine M. Burns

continued on page 7

are countless communication devices and techniques. From simple tricycle horns to expensive electronic devices, so there should be no reason to be left without a voice.

Some people choose to use leak speech. Leak speech is when you partially (or fully) deflate the cuff on the tube and allow some of that ventilator breath to come up through the vocal cords to speak. Sometimes the volume of the breath is increased considerably to allow talking and ventilation to happen at the same time. The disadvantages to leak speech are that too much volume can be harmful to the lungs, and that a person must learn to talk during inspiration, not naturally during exhalation. ■



The valve can go directly onto the hub of the tracheostomy tube like the photo on the left. Or, it will fit into standard disposable ventilator tubing like the photo above.

The Passy-Muir valve is a one-way valve, and when it is attached to the trach or placed in line with the ventilator tubing, it re-directs exhalation past the vocal cords and out the mouth and nose. This redirected exhalation restores voice, improves swallowing, restores physiologic PEEP (the air in the lungs that never completely exhales), improves secretion management by restoring the natural cough, improves oxygenation, can be used as a ventilator weaning and decannulation (take the trach tube out) tool, may decrease the risk of aspiration, and improves smell and taste to make eating more pleasurable.

Photo credits: Linda Dean, Passy-Muir Inc.

The Adventures of Traveling With a Vent

continued from page 3

suggested that on future trips they act as a concierge for me. I tell them our destination, and they identify a company there that will work with me in case of a machine malfunction. I then contact the company and confirm that they will be available in case of an emergency and that they do have a vent similar to what I am using. This has given me huge peace of mind. To date, we have only used this

back up plan in the United States, but I hope it will also work in Europe.

I consider myself fortunate to have traveled as often as I did with no problems, but from this point on, unless our destination is within driving distance of home, I will have a backup company in place and prescription in hand. ■