

# New stair-climbing, elevating wheelchair promoted by FDA

GAITHERSBURG, Md. (AP) — Stairs soon may no longer be insurmountable obstacles for some of the nation's 2 million wheelchair users.

The first wheelchair that can climb stairs — plus shift into four-wheel drive to scoot up a grassy hill and even elevate its occupant for eye-level conversation — took a major step toward the market Wednesday, as advisers to the Food and Drug Administration unanimously recommended it be allowed to sell.

But the panel backed a few limitations on the Independence iBOT 3000 Mobility System — which uses sensors and gyroscopes to balance on two wheels and navigate stairs — including that it sell only with a doctor's prescription and strict training to ensure users can drive it safely.

The FDA isn't bound by its advisers' recommendations, but usually follows them — and it granted the iBOT a special fast-track review reserved for important new medical technology, meaning a decision could come in a few months.

How does it climb? Most wheelchairs have two big back wheels and two smaller front wheels. The iBOT has four wheels the same size that rotate up and over one another to go up and down steps.

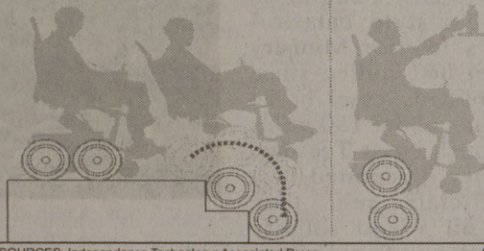
Well-known inventor Dean Kamen created the iBOT, and says wheelchair users tell him another feature is as appealing: The chair lifts onto two wheels so that its occupant, although still sitting, is elevated enough to reach high bookshelves and carry on eye-level conversations with people standing nearby.

### Upstairs, downstairs for the wheelchair

The Food and Drug Administration reviewed a wheelchair that potentially increases mobility for some of the nation's 2 million wheelchair users. Using a joystick and other controls, its occupant can go up and down stairs and elevate to eye level.

Two sets of wheels rotate up and over one another to go up and down steps. While sensors and gyroscopes balance it, its user must lean backward and forward to direct the chair to climb up or down.

The chair lifts onto two wheels to raise its occupant to eye level, or to reach an item previously out of range.



SOURCES: Independence Technology; Associated Press

"One reason I built it was to let people stand up," said Kamen, who licensed the iBOT to Johnson & Johnson. "We treat a lot of adults like children because they can't stand up."

"I wanted to take it home and keep it," said Karl Barnard of Tilton, N.H., who tested the iBOT in a study required by the FDA, which regulates wheelchair safety.

In the iBOT, he rose to the height of a 6-foot-tall person to do his grocery shopping without help. Barnard, who lost use of his legs 25 years ago, has no stairs in his home, but was impressed with the four-wheel drive that let him roll up hills and through gravel on his farm, places his manual wheelchair can't go.

But with a predicted \$29,000 price tag, Barnard, 46, calls it "more a luxury item" that he probably wouldn't spring for until he's too old to push his manual wheelchair easily.

While several FDA advisers called the chair potentially revolutionary, they also cautioned that it's not for everyone.

Patients must have the use of at least one arm to operate the chair, moving it with a joystick and other controls, and so far it's built only for large teenagers and adults.



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#### Cuban man pleads guilty for hijacking

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A Cuban man pleaded guilty Wednesday to federal air piracy and kidnapping charges in the 1980 hijacking of a Delta Air Lines flight to Havana.

Miguel Aguiar Rodriguez, 55, faces a possible life sentence at sentencing in March. He was arrested in August after showing up for an appointment with the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Miami using an alias.

Aguiar and his brother, Roberto, boarded the flight bound for Atlanta and threat-

ened to set fire to bottles containing a flammable liquid, authorities said.

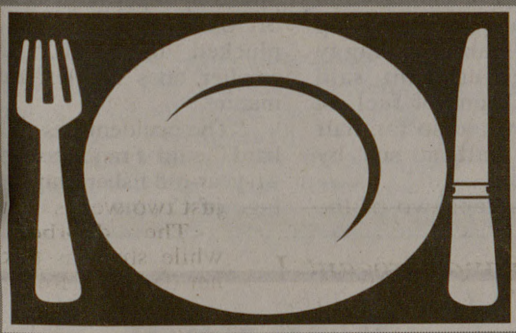
#### Gravel truck knocks school bus into house

ELGIN, Ill. (AP) — Eighteen middle school students were shaken up Wednesday morning

when a gravel truck hit their bus and knocked it into a house, school officials said.

School, hospital and police officials said none of the injuries appeared serious.

Police cited the truck driver for disobeying a red light and failing to reduce speed to avoid an accident, Lt. Paul McCurtain said.



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