

The future's bright? Technology in Speech and Language Therapy.

Cristina McKean and Stephen Bloch, Editors in Chief, IJLCD

As we enter 2019 it is hard to overstate the influence and reach of technology in our everyday lives. Many of us carry more processing power in our pockets and bags every day than the 'super-computers' of the 70s and 80s and take for granted the ability to be connected with our friends and family around the globe 24 hours a day. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that when we asked RCSLT members and IJLCD readers to vote on the topic of a Special Issue of the Journal, the use of technology in Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) was an emphatic winner.

Recent advances in technology and its widening availability and portability offer many potential opportunities to SLT practice. These include innovations in how and where intervention is delivered, revolutions in access methods for Alternative or Augmentative Communicative (AAC) systems and in the flexibility and usability of those systems. However, it also brings new demands. In a society where technology permeates our lives, where many basic services are accessed online and where many people can find their voice and their social support through social media, SLT practice cannot afford to ignore its significance for the individuals with communication disabilities with whom we work.

Linked to this Special Issue we were delighted to be able to invite Professor Annalu Waller to deliver our Annual Winter Lecture in 2017. In her lecture and the accompanying paper in this issue "*Telling tales: Unlocking the potential of AAC Technologies*" she provides a unique view on past successes and failures, present innovations and challenges and the potential for the future of technologies in AAC. She describes the reality that technological AAC 'solutions' are often abandoned by users and challenges professionals to understand the complex reasons which might lie behind this and to think beyond transactional, needs and wants based interactions to more social and interactional communication based on the sharing of experiences. The paper cautions that technology itself is not a panacea and that co-construction of such narratives often still require the support of a skilled communication partner.

In the following collection of papers, the focus moves beyond AAC. We see innovations in the use of technology as tools for intervention. These include Jane Marshall and colleagues' exploration of digital technology to support writing interventions with people with aphasia and Sara Wood and colleagues' use of electropalatography to treat speech disorders in children and young people with Down Syndrome.

Perhaps unsurprisingly we also see the development of web or tablet/phone-based Apps. As practitioners will know, there is a plethora of non-evidence-based 'Speech Therapy' apps available. It is clearly important that such apps are held to the same standards as other interventions and so we are pleased to publish the work of Seiler and colleagues who take the first steps to evaluate the efficacy of an app designed to support the development of phonological and decoding skills in children with language and literacy impairments. Also, the potential for self-administered treatment through digital technology is examined by Macoir and colleagues in building vocabulary in individuals

with aphasia. Pennington and colleagues report on the vital early stages of app development where issues of acceptability and feasibility of the intervention are carefully addressed. This study “Feasibility of communication training for parents of preschool children with motor disorders with remote coaching through smartphone apps” also speaks to the potential of technologies for the implementation of models of remote therapy and of self-managed care/intervention which also feature in other papers in this edition.

The feasibility of ‘remote’ or telehealth SLT management is also explored by Rebecca Sutherland and colleagues in relation to assessment for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and the evidence for its effectiveness in the management of communication and swallowing disorders in Parkinson’s disease is reviewed in an important paper by Deborah Theodoros and colleagues. This review points up the need to broaden the focus of research beyond telehealth perhaps looking to innovations such as self-managed care.

Finally the crucial issue of digital exclusion is explored by Melissa Brunner and colleagues in an important qualitative study unpacking the barriers and facilitators to social media use in people following TBI.

One of the privileges of working as Editors in Chief of the journal is to be regularly reminded of the incredible diversity of the field and of the spirit of innovation which exists in the speech and language therapy profession and is epitomised by in the papers included here. It is clear we live in exciting times with respect to the use of technology in Speech and Language Therapy and there is much untapped potential. Crucially the future will require close collaboration to co-design solutions drawing on the expertise of technologists, speech and language therapists and, most importantly, people with communication disabilities themselves to make the most of these opportunities.