Limbless Association

Assistive Technology – A Means to Independence

Assistive Technology (AT) is best described as any product or service designed to enable independence for disabled and older people. It replaces previous terminology such as *disability equipment* or *aids for the disabled,* which, in relation to the latter phrase evokes memories of rather unsexy items like commodes and bath boards. The new term – Assistive Technology – more easily encompasses these products, as well as a growing range of electronic gadgets and gizmos that can make the journey to independence much easier for many people with a disability.

The Government has recognised the importance of AT in independent living, through its recent investment in community equipment services. In the past, these have been provided by both health and social services, who supply a range of AT, such as beds, bath aids, raised toilet seats and all manner of items people may need for living independently at home. They are the kind of things that are fundamental to our personal care and needs and they enable us to be discharged from hospital more quickly. Over the last few years these services have been brought together as an integrated body to improve efficiency, and the equipment they supply is provided free of charge, up to the value of £1000. For larger items there may be a charge/contribution and rules on eligibility varies in different parts of the country at the present time.

To date, social services have provided some very simple electrical devices, like door entry intercoms, but more sophisticated items are now on the market. As the price of electronic devices reduces, it should benefit many more people, so the services need to be ready to accommodate this shift. You may not be aware that the automatic garage door opener was originally designed to help disabled car drivers. How things have moved on! The speed and pressures of modern life now means that labour-saving devices are part of everyday existence, so everyone is demanding "remote control" of their environment. The spin off from this technological revolution means that we now have the potential to revolutionise the lives of many more disabled people than ever before. Not only is it now more affordable, the stigma has also been removed from having to use 'special aids'. Indeed the more 'snazzy' the assistive technology the 'cooler' it currently seems to be.

Another reason for the modernisation of community equipment services is to enable them to keep pace with advances like "tele-care", the term being used to describe the kind of devices that can measure blood pressure or heart rates and feed the information directly to a hospital. The use and application of "surveillance technology" is also being developed and used for instance to sense when a kettle has been left to boil dry or someone has fallen out of bed. It is being used increasingly with older people, particularly those who have memory problems, but it could also have applications for people with sensory or mobility impairments.

Community equipment is not the whole story however. There are many other forms of AT and these are provided by a range of specialist services such as the NHS, the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). In some cases the voluntary and/or public sector can provide different types of equipment or aids, which may not be available elsewhere, but in most cases you will be able to receive some support for any equipment that you need.

The NHS provides Wheelchairs, Orthotics and Prosthetics and one-off devices made by rehabilitation engineers to name but a few. Specialist Environmental Controls have also been provided by the NHS since the 1970s for people who were severely disabled e.g. those who were paralysed in all four limbs

(tetraplegic) and in some areas the NHS also provides Augmented Communication devices (with synthesised speech). Whilst there has been some recent investment in the provision of communications technology for children within the DfES, provision for adults through the UK remains very patchy. Assessment might be available (through the NHS) but the provision of the equipment itself might prove to be more difficult, leaving people having to fall back on their own resources or charities. This can mean that the pattern of provision of AT is a bit like a patchwork quilt at the moment and can be difficult to negotiate.

Technologically speaking, the future looks better than ever, so we just need the supply system to be simplified. There can be no doubt that AT can make a huge difference to all aspects of a disabled persons life. The following is already possible:

- Getting up in the morning with an electronically operated bed.
- Going to the bathroom to use a toilet that cleans, washes and dries, plus a shower cubicle that does the same for the whole body.
- Managing stairs at home using a stair-lift.
- Having the house lights and doors operate automatically.
- Driving using adapted cars.
- Using a voice activated computer at a height-adjustable desk.
- Going to a fully-accessible theatre (for hearing, vision and mobility).

Of course AT cannot do everything. It cannot help us to put on a jacket yet! Most importantly, it cannot replace human contact, but it can go a long way to making independence safer and easier if we match the technology to the person correctly, although this is not as easy as it might first appear. We do not all get on with complicated operating instructions for example.

The other challenges are keeping up-to-date with new products, knowing what our rights are in terms of eligibility, getting good advice and having services that are capable of delivering AT effectively. The local community equipment service should be a good starting point, but only time will tell if they can cope. In the meantime, the voluntary sector will do its best to fill the gap and provide the information and support you need. The internet is another excellent source of information, but as yet not all AT providers or products are listed!

By Ann Stead - FAST Associate and Disability Consultant

Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST) is an organisation working with the AT community, to get new inventions onto the market. We aim to get well-designed, useful AT to disabled and older people at home, so they can live independent lives. Visit the FAST website at http://www.fastuk.org to find an online database with information on AT research projects & organisations. You can actively participate in development of AT by joining the FAST User Panel or raise the profile of assistive technology service provision by joining the AT Forum.