

Grace Gane Memorial Award Lecture *presented by Ann Smail*

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) in New Zealand: working together to enhance communication

Past influences, present trends, and future possibilities

Abstract:

The New Zealand Disability Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities are policies that uphold the rights of disabled people. Communication is a basic human right and a fundamental principle in these strategies and should be seen as central to breaking down participation and inclusion barriers. Many people with complex communication needs do not have the means to communicate to the best of their ability without appropriate AAC tools and strategies. As speech-language therapists, we have an important role to provide these tools and strategies, whether it is for a child who is an emergent communicator and requires AAC for a short period, someone who will need an AAC system for their entire life, or a person that because of an acquired medical condition needs AAC to assist them to continue to communicate.

In New Zealand, the TalkLink Trust was established to provide specialist assistive technology service, and 2016 marks 25 years since the signing of the TalkLink Trust deed. When TalkLink was established, we were fortunate to be given the Māori name Wahanga Tu Korero. The name Wahanga Tu Korero reflects our purpose of working with people to ensure their thoughts and ideas can be effectively conveyed through the use of different forms of communication. This is what TalkLink aims to do, and from small beginnings with a staff of five, most of whom were part-time and working only in Auckland, the Trust has grown to a staff of over 40 working throughout New Zealand.

The development of AAC services in New Zealand is not just the prerogative of TalkLink, rather, it is one of partnership and a shared understanding of how augmentative communication tools and strategies can enhance the lives of people with complex communication needs. Partners in the AAC journey include, first and foremost, disabled people and their whanau, as well as therapists, teachers, university researchers, disability support groups, equipment suppliers, and government agencies. It is the collective power of all these people that has seen the development of AAC/ communication assistive technology services in New Zealand.

The Grace Gane Memorial lecture will present an overview of AAC in New Zealand, from the time TalkLink was established 25 years ago through to today and beyond. This overview will include client stories, AAC best practice models and influences, competency and funding frameworks, as well as technology developments. The address will conclude with some thoughts on the future direction of AAC in Aotearoa New Zealand, including technology developments and how to better incorporate AAC into speech-language therapy practice.