

Breaking the Silence:

Providing communication aids for Chinese children who cannot talk

Following our 2007 discovery that augmentative communication (AAC) appeared unknown in China, DEAL received funding from the Australia-China Council for two visits to Shanghai to provide training in AAC to parents, teachers and therapists. The visits were arranged by Dr. Kexing Sun from the Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Highlights-2008

On the first visit in November 2008 I worked with children with cerebral palsy, autism or other developmental disabilities and conducted in-service training for therapists in Putuo and Shanghai Pearl Hospitals before delivering two 2-hour plenary presentations on AAC at an International Seminar on Speech Therapy at Putuo Hospital attended by more than 100 local therapists. After each presentation I was literally mobbed by therapists desperate to get the laminated communication boards I had brought to give away. Before leaving I set up a small library of communication equipment and software at Putuo Hospital for use by therapists.

During this visit I met many fascinating people, including Yi Lin, a smart young lady of 15 with cerebral palsy who can walk - just - and talk - just - very unclearly. She cannot use her hands and she has never been to school. Nonetheless she has learnt to augment her dysarthric speech by writing with a pen held in the toes of her right foot. I lined up her 14-year-old brother to teach her Pinyin, a representation of Mandarin in European letters. With a large keyboard (which she'd use with her toes) attached to a laptop, a keyguard to stop her hitting 2 keys at once, and a text-to-speech program (yes, they do exist for Mandarin) Yi Lin could both type and talk.



Every child who couldn't walk who came to see me was carried by a parent, regardless of the child's age or size. The government does supply wheelchairs, but one size fits - or doesn't fit - all. A 5-year-old with spasticity and extensor spasm gets exactly the same off-the-shelf chair with no straps as an adult who has a broken leg. On my return to Australia I found a freely-available Norwegian design for a cheap easily-fabricated adjustable chair was being used successfully by a colleague in the Philippines. We have applied to Aus-Aid for funds for a small workshop to produce prototypes in China. If the Aus-Aid funding comes through the resulting chairs will be a truly international effort!

Highlights-2009

Apart from the usual assessments and training sessions most of my next visit to Shanghai in June 2009 was spent in discussions about the possibility of establishing China's first-ever AAC Resource Centre. This visit finished at the 2nd Chinese International Conference on Speech Therapy in Beijing, where I delivered a plenary presentation on *Communication Aids Programmed in Mandarin*. Partly as a result of DEAL's input the conference included four plenary presentations on Augmentative Communication, which aroused considerable interest.

The good news came after my return. Before the end of 2009 China's first Augmentative Communication Resource Centre will open in a new Rehabilitation Centre based at Quyang Hospital in the Hongkou District of Shanghai. Of course the hospital will need assistance in obtaining appropriate communication aids, and in training local therapists in their use, so DEAL's involvement in China may not be over just yet.

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