IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES: THE JOURNEY TOWARDS OBTAINING AAC

INTRO

Identifying the most appropriate Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) solution/s for an individual can be complex, and requires collaboration between consumers and AAC prescribers to co-design a solution.

LifeTec Australia supports consumers to obtain the most appropriate Assistive Technology (AT) to meet their needs by following the multi-step AT Journey (de Jonge, Hoyle, Layton & Verdonck, 2017). **See figure 1 below.**

LifeTec's dedicated AAC service supports people with complex communication needs (CCN) to explore communication solutions.

IMAGINE
Imagine the possibilities
Establish goals & expectations

SEEK
Identify specific requirements
Establish device criteria
Identify options & resources
Locate local support

LIVE
Set up & fit the technology
Access training
Maintenance & repair follow-up
Monitoring & evaluation

CHOOSE
Trial & evaluate options
Develop a funding strategy
Purchase the technology

FIGURE 1

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews with six individuals and their support people who were, or had, engaged with LifeTec to find AAC solutions, were conducted to gain insight into the IMAGINE/SEEK (I/S) stages.

Each participant was interviewed by a LifeTec Speech Pathologist (SLP) who was informed of, but not involved in, their AAC journey.

Each interview was transcribed, analysed, and coded into themes that related to the I/S stages of the AT journey. LifeTec SLPs also participated in a focus group, facilitated by another allied health professional, about their experience of the I/S stages.

RESULTS

1 RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE QUALITY IMAGINING

➔ Factsheets, videos, websites (e.g. ILC Database, supplier and manufacturers websites), and symbol based goal setting tools.

➔ Exposure to a range of AAC options, demonstrations of and hands on experience with equipment.

"I find through a use of database, demonstration, trial, touching [AAC systems], talking about products and using the factsheets...they have a clearer understanding for themselves, what they want out of [an AAC system]...and what that journey might look like" - **SLP**

➔ Consumers feel listened to and understood when allowed time and space to share their story and explore past experiences and future aspirations.

➔ Tailoring information to the individual is critical for engagement in the process.

"I think if [the SLP] showed too many products or anything...you'd just get overwhelmed by it...and then it would be like, 'well, I don't know if this is the right way to go, because I don't think that I could handle it'" - **Laura* (Parent)**

➔ Consumer-SLP relationships are important. Being responsive, accessible, flexible and having extensive knowledge of equipment are important SLP characteristics identified by consumers.

CONSUMER EXPERIENCE

2 EXPERIENCE OF THE PROCESS

➔ People who engage with the imagining process feel more informed about AAC and the possibilities.

"We didn't know what AAC devices were, the magnitude of what was actually out there on the market. So having [the SLP] explain to us about that...really helped" - **Laura* (Parent)**

➔ Individuals who are more informed develop clearer direction for their future, and are empowered to take control of their AAC journey.

➔ A strengths based approach enables people to be open to the AAC possibilities.

"[The SLP] didn't discount Caleb. He said 'you can see the potential in him, let's not limit him, let's give him something to move to'"* - **Lily* (Parent)**

3 OUTCOMES FOR CONSUMERS OF A CO-DESIGN APPROACH

➔ Consumers feel empowered by having an expanded understanding through clear information on AAC which helps demystify the technology.

➔ Co-design enables Consumers to think about the future to set achievable goals to create a shared vision of the possibilities.

"I'm sure the SLP had which one she thought would be suitable for Nancy but she didn't tell us which one. Nancy* had to find that out for herself by using those devices"* - **Mary* (Parent)**

➔ Consumers' feel ownership in the process of finding a good technology match to achieve their goals.

➔ Reduced device abandonment.

"Because the Consumers are more engaged and hopefully feel empowered" (throughout the decision-making process) - **SLP**

DISCUSSIONS

4 STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

STRENGTHS:

➔ Provides a structured, streamlined process enabling clear direction for Consumers. This enables SLPs to be thorough, efficient and consistent.

➔ Consumers can revisit the IMAGINE stage throughout the whole journey as communication potential is revealed.

"During the assessment we redid the entire I/S because they suddenly realised that it was a valuable thing and were ready to imagine what might be helpful" - **SLP**

➔ I/S sessions allow desired features for potential devices to be examined in the CHOOSE stage.

"it can get them thinking about features which is helpful for us in the CHOOSE phase...and they can start providing us with information about what they think they might need" - **SLP**

➔ Consumers with prior experience of the AT journey are able to identify clearer goals.

"They are "more confident [and] more actively involved in decisions around equipment [in the future]" - **SLP**

CHALLENGES:

➔ Experience and knowledge of AAC systems varies between individuals and can make it difficult to engage people in the imagining process.

➔ People with preconceived ideas of an AAC solution may be hesitant to explore alternatives.

➔ People with limited experience of AAC may initially be more passive within the process, and see the SLP as the 'expert'.

"It is actually [the individuals] journey...It is about increasing their confidence and spending a little more time in the IMAGINE stage" - **SLP**

➔ It can be difficult to determine how much to actively engage consumers in the process. People may become overwhelmed with too much new information.

➔ The AT Journey can appear challenging to people unfamiliar with it, however the structure assists in clarifying the process.
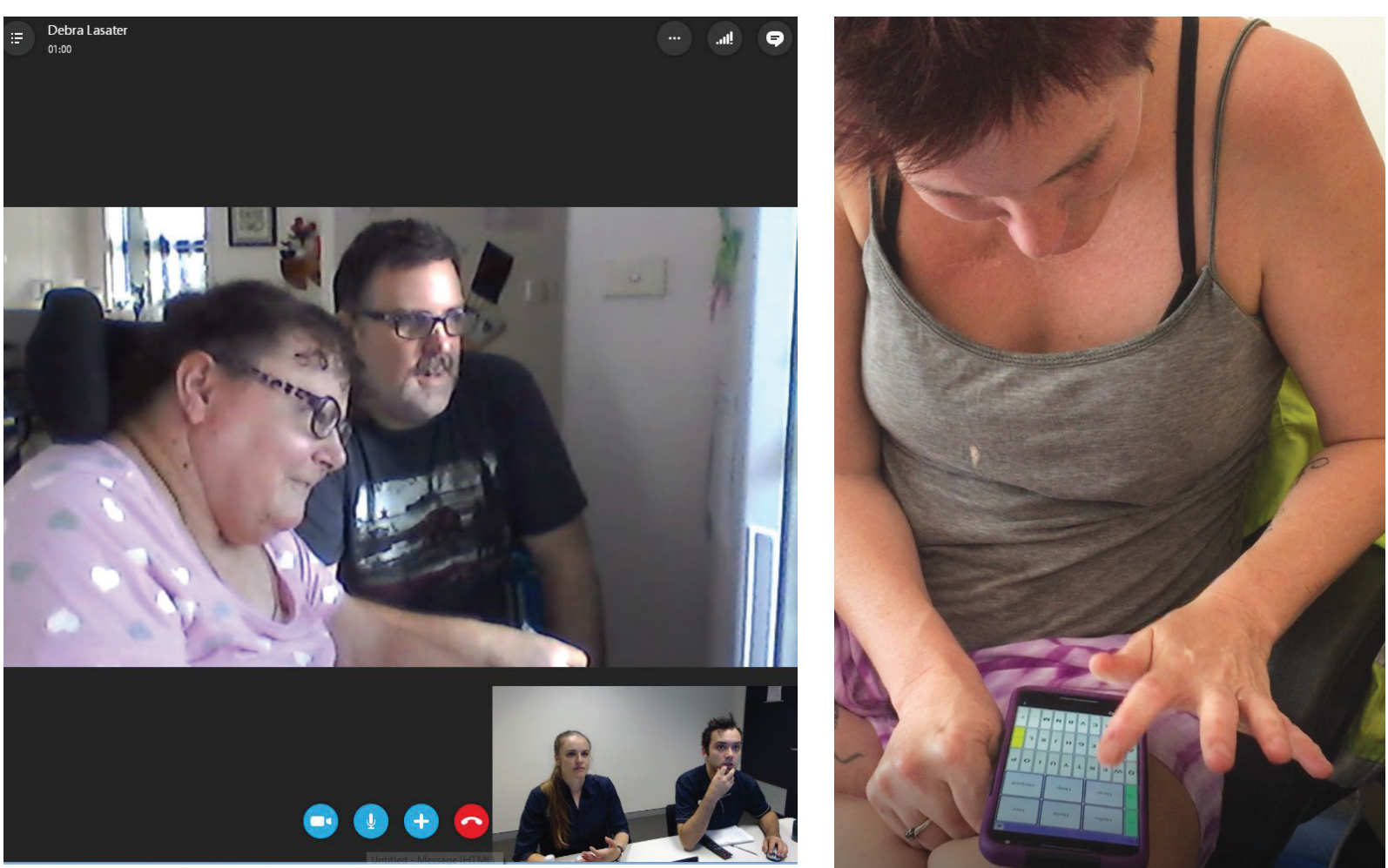
5 AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT TO ENHANCE CONSUMERS EXPERIENCES AND PROMOTE AAC KNOWLEDGE

➔ **Development of tailored resources** to help imagining and development of clear goals e.g. videos of AAC, online resources, AAC Journey Handbook, Accessible/Easy English documentation.

➔ Continuous evaluation of equipment to ensure **a range of AAC systems are available** to support imagining.

➔ **Explicit guidelines** regarding roles and responsibilities within the AAC Journey to clarify expectations.

➔ **Ongoing SLP skill development** to ensure continued responsiveness to individual needs, including redirecting people to documentation about the AAC journey.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Further research is required to explore the challenges of implementing the AT Journey in rural settings via telehealth, cross cultural practice and further inclusion of the people with complex communication needs.

The process should be continually monitored to evaluate it's ongoing effectiveness for individuals with CCN and AAC prescribers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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IMAGINE **SEEK** **CHOOSE** **LIVE**

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