ISAAC Endorses New Australian Symbol for Communication Access

On November 17, 2011, the new symbol for communication access was launched by Scope's Communication Resource Centre in Melbourne, Australia. This was the culmination of five years of work by people with complex communication needs (CCN), in partnership with the Communication Access Network (CAN) in Victoria and key stakeholders. ISAAC, our international peak body for people who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication, has now endorsed communication access and the communication symbol. It joins other key national organizations in Australia such as National Disability Services, Speech Pathology Australia, Communication Rights Australia, Able Australia and ComTec Yooralla in giving support to this initiative.

Where did it all begin?

The Communication Access Network, a government-funded service consisting of the Communication Resource Centre at the hub and 13 Regional Communication Services across Victoria (approximately 4.5 million population), has been at the core. The role of the Communication Access Network is to support the communication needs of adults in Victoria, to promote self-directed lives and promote the participation of people with communication disabilities in community life.

The objectives[1] of the Communication Access Network (CAN) include:
- facilitate the participation and inclusion of people with complex communication needs in community life
- increase access to generic services for people with complex communication needs
- engage in capacity building for individuals and the general community
- raise awareness of communication as a human right
- provide opportunities for active participation and leadership by people with complex communication needs

To this end, speech pathologists in the Regional Communication Services developed over 50 projects in partnership with retailers and services to promote communication access. This led to the awareness of the need for a common symbol to identify these services for people with communication disability and those who support them.

In 2008-2010, the Communication Resource Centre led a project to identify a symbol for communication access through a state-wide consultative process which followed the Australian Standard AS 2342-1992. This standard provided a framework for the development, testing and implementation of information and safety symbols and symbolic signs. Over 1,700 people responded to 10 possible symbols. People with communication disabilities were able to make their selection using a set of custom made Talking Mats® (a strategy to support choice making for people who cannot speak). The symbol selected became the new symbol for Communication Access.

The next phase of the project was to develop criteria for communication access, develop a way to assess communication access, to promote and market this new symbol and educate the public more broadly about communication access.

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[1] Communication Access Network Guidelines 2010

Four forums were held in which people with CCN shared their experiences of communicating in the community, leading to a process of developing criteria for communication access. Participants also contributed to the development and piloting of a Communication Access Checklist.

As communication access is a new concept within disability access, and to date rarely identified as an area requiring access, public promotion and education about communication access was a vital first step.

Funding from ACE – Australian Communication Exchange was obtained to deliver 13 communication access forums across Victoria in partnership with the Regional Communication Services making up the Communication Access Network. Each Regional Communication Service undertook to host a forum in their region and invite key stakeholders, disability service providers, local community members, and people with disability.

The Communication Resource Centre applied the following principles in delivering this aspect of Communication Access:
   i. People with communication disability would lead this process and be the key presenters at the forums
   ii. People with communication disability would take on this role as paid employees
   iii. Presenters would be supported with technology, transport, accommodation, attendant care and personal support during presentations

Over 700 people attended the presentations. Informal data was collected by presenting forum participants with two questions: The data presented includes information from 50 small discussion groups from all the forums collectively.

> Question 1: Why do you think people with communication disabilities have negative experiences in the community?
> o   70% of the groups cited fear of people with disabilities
> o   70% cited lack of awareness about disability and people with communication disabilities
>
> Question 2: What do you think could be done to address this?
> o   98% of the groups said public education was needed

It is important to note that these answers focus appropriately on the need for changes in the communication environment and not in the person with a communication disability.

The next task was to develop the process for businesses services and organizations to be assessed for communication access. The first of the 8 steps to Communication Access was to complete the online Communication Access Self Assessment Quiz.

If the service or business was interested in having a Communication Access Assessment, they contact the Communication Resource Centre and further information would be sent to them on 'Becoming Communication Accessible'. In this way they have the best chance of meeting the criteria for communication access and being awarded the symbol.

The Communication Access Checklist will then be completed by a person with a communication disability who is a trained Communication Access Assessor. Businesses services and organizations are judged to be "communication accessible" based on 31 criteria. The communication access symbol is awarded to places that meet the majority of the criteria, and they will be listed in the Scope website Directory of Communication Accessible Places. This is reviewed annually. Services or businesses receive a feedback letter acknowledging the features that have made them communication accessible and making recommendations where this could be further improved.

At present, communication access is a Victoria-based initiative, but there is interest from other parts of Australia about including communication access as part of their access criteria.

Communication access is an important part of removing barriers to equal citizenship for all. It is a part of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Person with Disability (2006), of which Australia is a signatory. This affirms that communication access is a right not a privilege, and when businesses, organizations and services display the symbol for communication access, they are playing an important role in turning these rights into the everyday experiences of people with complex communication needs.

For further information about the communication access symbol Click here