

Working together

- the experiences of an ICU nurse and a speech & language therapist

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ICU-Talk: A communication aid for ICU patients

Current methods of communication for patients in ICU are very limited in their application. Alphabet boards, symbol charts, writing with a pen or mouthing words can be very time consuming and frustrating for both the patient to use and the nurse to interpret (Ashworth 1984, Albarran 1991). ICU-Talk is a three year research project which has developed a computerised communication aid for intubated patients in ICU. This project has utilised the knowledge and expertise from each of the multidisciplinary team members throughout the development of ICU-Talk. There were many challenges to face and overcome, from the patients' condition of generalised weakness, their cognitive impairment from illness and sedation, to the harsh ICU environment where the communication aid required to be rugged, waterproof and easily moved.

Effective communication for this group of patients is a definite problem (Costello 2000) It has been said that patients in ICU who cannot communicate effectively may develop long term problems after their discharge. (Russell 1999) The ICU-Talk communication aid allows the patient to select from a prestored database containing phrases, sentences and questions. These are relevant to the ICU environment and the patient's condition. The patient facilitates this by means of a touchscreen or a specific input device.

A multidisciplinary team consisting of a speech and language therapist, a software engineer and a specialist ICU nurse have tested this communication aid with intubated patients in ICU. Results have indicated that although patients have effectively used the communication aid, they have little recollection of doing so. The patient's relatives have commented that they think ICU-Talk is a "great idea". The nursing staff feel that ICU-Talk is a good idea but would ideally like the communication aid to be smaller.

This presentation will describe the development of the ICU-Talk device and discuss the results of the project.

References :

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