Conference Abstract

'Keeping in Touch': Using the internet in speech and language therapy

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Abstract

Use of technology in health care has risen exponentially in recent years alongside the increased demand for healthcare services. In a climate of rising healthcare costs innovations in the use of technology may provide a cost effective means of interacting with clients. Programmes such as Skype enable sound and video calls between devices. Remote live interactions using Skype could improve the quality of care by increasing the level of accessibility, reach and convenience between health professionals and their clients. In Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) there may be additional benefits to care being provided in the clients' natural environment via videoconferencing as the surroundings are more meaningful to them. Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) in private practice are implementing its use, despite limited evidence of its effectiveness. We aimed to address this issue and provide data on its use within clinical practice in an NHS setting.

In a prospective pilot study, seven SLTs and their multiple clients were provided with tablet computer devices to enable them to have 'virtual sessions' via Skype instead of 'face to face' consultations. We incorporated an evaluation into the pilot and assessed client and therapists perceptions of using Skype instead of face to face contact. Information on resource savings, e.g. time to travel to clinic, travel costs, was collected with a questionnaire app on the device that sent this anonymised data to a remote server at the university. Clients and therapists were also interviewed at the end of the pilot.

Implementing the service required governance and clinical practice within the Trust to be accommodated. There were few technical difficulties encountered throughout the pilot, and any encountered were addressed quickly. The majority of therapists and clients were overwhelmingly

positive about the use of Skype and cited multiple benefits relating to convenience, time saved, reduced costs of travel and greater flexibility of access to the service and clients. These included SLTs offering multiple shorter 'virtual' sessions in the home, instead of a longer session in school, negating the need to take the child out of lessons and greater engagement in therapy by clients.

The presentation will discuss some practical issues with delivery therapy 'virtually' and highlight the benefits to SLTs and their specific clients.

Keywords

speech and language therapy; virtual consultations