

I am Meredith Allan. After retiring from the Australian Public Service four years ago, I decided to pursue a Master's degree by research at Deakin University in Melbourne. I am also world President of ISAAC, which is the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. I work as a communication access assessor and trainer on a casual basis for Scope, a disability agency in Australia. I will use the acronym AAC to describe my communication method.

Probably the most important issue in the area of AAC, is getting Communication Access recognized as an access need, similar to how a wheelchair symbol is used internationally to indicate a mobility need, or a white cane is used to indicate a visual need. To date there are three Communication access symbols that I know of, but there could be more. We need Rehabilitation International to recognize one as the universal access symbol.

Like many of you here today, I could not get excited about speaking at the United Nations, knowing that I would have to face regular humiliations and discriminating attitudes to get here. I have two disabilities which make me vulnerable to the outside world. Firstly my physical mobility, and secondly I have no voice. My personal safety is my primary concern. I am fortunate I have economic independence, and live in a well secured apartment building.

Assumptions are a very bad thing. In January this year I had to have a small day procedure done in a suburban hospital. It was such a small procedure, it didn't even require an anesthetic. I thought that I was handling myself well at admissions. To my surprise, the admissions staff member then told me, I need to call your mother. Perplexed, I asked why, and the admission staff member told me that it was necessary because she is listed as my next of kin. again I asked why and then the admissions staff member said I need your mother to sign the admissions forms! I had driven to the hospital by myself, I was answering the questions on my I pad, I had completed the online form and yet to the person sitting in front of me I was not competent. The person had invented a story to fit an assumption built in the minds of others. People regularly assume that because we cannot talk, our intelligence must be questioned. I was also dismayed to find that my hospital record had that I lived in an assisted living facility. How more inaccuracies will I find in my hospital records?

Internationally, a major area of research in AAC has focused on protecting both females and males who use AAC from abuse and domestic violence. Also providing resources so that people who use AAC can have access to the legal system. Abuse takes many forms, not the least using the power of the voice over a person that has no voice. The vulnerability of having no voice is always exposed.

Speech generating devices, like the one I use, are empowering, but people in emerging nations cannot afford them. Considering that 80% of all persons with disabilities live in developing countries according to the World health organization, issues around affordability of AAC is of huge importance. iPads and tablets have made speech generated voices accessible to more people but there are still many people who cannot afford ipads or tablets and many more who cannot use ipads or tablets. As I know saliva on the iPad or tablet will render them useless. Many people who use AAC, including myself, have saliva issues. In November 2017 I met a young woman in Beijing who used eye gaze technology to speak and she was impressive at using it. Unfortunately she will never own the technology she was using. Eye gaze technology can cost \$20,000. Should cost be the factor that prevents some people from having a voice? Can having a voice ever be too expensive? When I requested funding for a new iPad, I was refused and told quite bluntly it was a computer, not assistive technology.

Basic literacy skills opens up the world to people who use AAC. It is rare that people who use AAC obtain a good quality education. As a person with a disability, our abilities are underestimated by many in the community including teachers. My father told me that one of my teachers told him “that girl has unrealistic expectations, she wants to go to university”. One teacher believed in me though, all I needed was one teacher, and it was she who helped integrate me into a regular High School. We need to be able to spell and read to use our communication devices effectively. While we can communicate well with symbols and gesture, we need people we trust to interpret what we want to say. But if we want to be independent, we have to be able to communicate with the community outside.

One of the committees we have within ISAAC is the BUILD committee. Build offers resources, strategies and mentorship to those in emerging nations free of cost. People from these countries are thirsty for these resources and are using them. Speech pathologists in Singapore have developed a valuable online resource for parents and caregivers in sharing their concerns about their child and AAC. Recently members from this committee supplied Portuguese communication boards to Mozambique, to assist with communication in the temporary clinics and hospitals between Doctors without Borders who could not all speak Portugues. many persons who were affected by the devastating hurricanes Idai and Kenneth, and who did not share the same language as the volunteer doctors. In my opinion, the art of communication is the language of caring.

AAC resources are being adapted and used in many ways. Over the past thirty years researchers have developed an AAC vocabulary of the most commonly used words. It is exciting to see in Germany today, refugees are being taught the German language by using the AAC vocabulary. Similar things are happening in Sweden where communication barriers with refugees were causing tremendous concerns in hospitals. Not only was there a language barrier but some refugees are too traumatized to talk. The Swedish government provided a grant so that every hospital in Sweden can have access to Communication boards. We just smile sweetly when people say to us “these boards would be good for people who cannot speak”.

Conclusion. Communication is a basic human need as well as a human right. We deserve the opportunity to access the community and to access services with the same respect as other people. The C R P D enshrines our rights access to communication and the value of being different. My dream is that we all can go out into the world, accessing all areas, including communication.

Thank you