Can you have a good conversation without speech?

A new low-tech tool to increase complex communication for people with aphasia

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**Premise**
- Icons can be assistive if simple
- Simple images/icons can help expression and comprehension for people with aphasia
- Complex icons can confuse rather than clarify
- People with aphasia know more than they can say
- People with aphasia can lack initiation in communication exchanges
- A conversation partnership may not be equitable in supported conversations

**Background**
Research has demonstrated that people with aphasia find two-dimensional graphic images easier to interpret than written or gestural cues. Otto Neurath founded the idea of an international system of typographic picture education or ‘isotype’ in 1936.

“A simple picture kept in memory is better than any number of complex ones which have gone out of it.” Neurath (1936).

Existing low-tech systems create elaborate images for complex information, or a symbol per word approach, which means words that are not inherently imageable still have associated images created. Both of these approaches risk limiting the scope or intelligibility of the message.

In response to these challenges, the author developed a novel system: Intuitive iconography aims to minimise the learning required to use the system effectively. Icons are designed to be culturally, age and gender impartial. It also aims to reduce the burden on conversation partners to generate topics and use drawing to support written cues.

**Method**
13 coloured core and 80 supporting icons relevant to stroke survivors were developed, plus 15 patient specific icons. A magnetic whiteboard was used to allow a supported conversation to develop integrating the icons.

**Results**
The patient initiated conversations including:
- his relationship with his wife, her role as a carer and the additional responsibility that presented
- concerns regarding work, money, disability and bills
- his desire for greater independence and responsibility
- discharge plans
- his consideration of an alternative career related to his experience of stroke and aphasia

The patient rated partnership as the most important element and his conversation partner, his wife, felt it was their ability to share thoughts.

**Limitations**
- Single case study
- Only trialled in acute setting
- Target user profile not established

**Future development**
- Repeat with larger cohort
- Establish user suitability profiling
- Trial with patients with other types of communication difficulties
- Structured evaluation with people with aphasia on icon clarity

**Conclusion**
- CAS is an intuitive iconographic system
- Combinations of symbols increase complexity
- CAS increases patient and conversation partner confidence
- CAS allows conversations to develop that would not have arisen with supported conversation alone
- The person with aphasia can initiate and direct conversation
- The person with aphasia and their conversation partner are equal in creating successful conversations
- Minimal training is required before simple conversations can take place

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**References**