One Step Into the Future:
The Contributing Editor’s View

How slowly the world seems to progress for those at the cutting edge or frontier of a discipline or profession! Yet the typical occupational therapy clinician must marvel at the explosive speed with which new tools, new methods, and new concepts come upon us. Many therapists feel overwhelmed by computers, software, and the electronic devices that are now shown regularly at our annual conference exhibits. For many, it must seem that an impossible amount of information and technical skills is needed to employ this new technology. I believe that our profession can no longer afford to be sympathetic toward those who feel victimized by this press of information. Why not? Because indulgence in feelings of awe and trepidation over technology serves to excuse the practitioner from personal changes needed to effect larger societal changes. Those who metaphorically refer to explosions of information fuel the fires of those who resist changing the ways they currently think and work. Occupational therapy is predicated on encouraging patients and clients to willingly change for their own good. While all therapists believe it is both possible and beneficial for patients to change, not all therapists believe it is both possible and beneficial to seek such change for themselves.

This column exists for those who have the courage, interest, and foresight to translate developments in technology into new opportunities for our patients and our profession. Its purpose is to provide a forum for the public review of the costs and benefits, advantages and disadvantages of software and high technologies currently being marketed to occupational therapists. Although the column will not provide the prerequisite knowledge and skills needed to take advantage of such new tools, every attempt will be made to spell out how to appropriately utilize these innovations in practice settings. Reviews published here will present thoughtful and detailed analyses by persons with hands-on experience in using the items being considered. As Contributing Editor, I will also seek opinions from technology experts both within and outside our field so that the effect of individual reviewers’ biases and limitations will be minimized.

Mission
From the first software reviews published in April 1986 up to the present, this column has been devoted entirely to describing and discussing computer software believed to be of interest to occupational therapists. Great credit is due to Carol Gwin of AOTA’s Practice Division for her foresight in initiating and nurturing this venture. Hers was a risky and important first step; now the time has arrived to make some changes. The most notable of these is indicated by the change in name, which appears above. This section is now titled “Software & Technology Reviews.” What does this signify? In addition to continuing to review software packages, this column will also serve as a forum for the review and analysis of computerized evaluation and/or treatment systems (e.g., The BTE®,1 Bio-Lab®2), electronic devices such as environmental control units or augmentative communications systems, motorized mobility systems (including, but not limited to, electric wheelchairs), electronic sensory and motor aids (prostheses, orthotics, and robotics), and any other high technology devices targeted at occupational therapists as potential users.

Since high tech tools are often expensive (prices of $1,000 to $50,000 are common) and somewhat esoteric, the reviews will cover economic as well as technical considerations related to acquiring such technology. The cost–benefit, estimated revenue production potential, payback period to recover investment costs, maintenance contracts, required consumable supplies, other recurring expenses, depreciation rates, and the estimated useful lifetime of equipment will all be discussed. Likewise, the requisite skills and any special training needed to employ high tech devices in occupational therapy settings will be identified.

An important purpose of these reviews is to assist the clinician or administrator faced with deciding whether or not to acquire a particular device. It will therefore be of paramount importance to identify the weaknesses and limitations of such

1 Trademark of the Baltimore Therapeutic Equipment Company, Baltimore, MD
2 Trademark of Autogenic Systems Incorporated, Chicago, IL.
tools in addition to extolling their strengths. Information on virtues and advantages is readily available from manufacturers and distributors. Information on drawbacks, limitations, and contraindications for usage can come only from colleagues with the expertise and experience needed to critically review new developments and honestly share opinions, including reservations.

Format

Software reviews published here have followed a standardized format and will continue to do so in the future. Copies of software review publication guidelines may be obtained directly from me. Guidelines for reviews of technologies other than software are currently being developed. Those wishing to participate in writing technology guidelines should write to me to express interest and to describe their personal and professional qualifications for this project.

This column has appeared every other month as a regular feature of this journal. The decision to publish the column in alternate issues was purely pragmatic, based on the relatively small number of therapists willing and able to write software reviews. It is hoped that expanding the scope of this feature to include technology in addition to software will lead to an increase in publishable reviews. This, in turn, could lead to this section becoming a regular monthly feature of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy.

Reviews on specific software and technology items will be solicited. In addition, readers are invited to submit unsolicited reviews at any time. Such contributions should follow the established publication guidelines and will be reviewed by me and others with appropriate credentials to determine suitability for publication.

A caveat seems necessary: Members of our profession should understand that some publishers and vendors furnish complimentary review copies of items they wish to have reviewed in this column. Although such a submission does enhance the chances of a review being published, the provision of materials without charge in no way guarantees a favorable or positive review!

The opportunity for this column to serve as an important information and screening tool is very real. By providing critical reviews from those having firsthand knowledge of new products, our ability to protect occupational therapy consumers will be greatly enhanced. Feedback concerning this column or letters elaborating upon, or taking issue with, published reviews are invited and will be published as space allows.

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