



# 2021 AT Scholar Report

## SUZANNE MARTIN

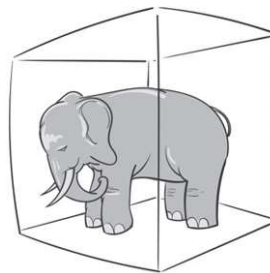
Suzanne Martin is a Speech and Language Therapist and Senior AAC Consultant at Ace Centre.

*“My sincere thanks for offering me the opportunity to attend the ATIA 2021 virtual conference this year. As you will see by my Impressions submission, I gained a lot from the experience and the impact of my learning from this event will certainly be far reaching.”*

## ATIA Impressions

As a Senior AAC Consultant who has worked in the field for too many years to mention and having attended many conferences around the world over that time I am both amazed and ashamed to say that this was my first time attending an ATIA conference! Supported by the generous funding opportunity offered by the British Assistive Technology Scholarship and helped in a practical sense by the offering of a completely virtual conference this year, my first experience of ATIA 2021 – AT Connected was certainly one to share with others.

There were many themes and connections that I drew out of my participation in the conference which have been applicable to my work here in the UK.



## ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

### Elephant in the Room

We cannot discuss Assistive Technology today without mentioning the elephant in the room of Covid-19! It has triggered perhaps the biggest shift in practice for AT practitioners and we have learned and continue to learn how to adapt to ensure that people who can benefit from AT continue to do so.

Many presentations offered practical ideas and techniques of how to offer quality services to a range of clients. Of note was ‘Not a temporary Solution, but a Better Option: Remote Support for ALS patients’ presented by Debra J Zeitlin and Nachum Lehman of the non-profit organisation; Bridging Voice. During the pandemic, the organisation switched to a 100% telehealth model of service delivery and found many advantages in doing so. They discussed issues such as having no geographical limitations, being able to provide more frequent sessions at optimal times, seeing patients in their own environments (rather than clinics) and the responsiveness of support (available immediately) as their key identified successes. As a result of their experience, they plan to continue this telehealth model of service delivery beyond the pandemic restrictions. Their findings, which were echoed in many other



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presentations, made me reflect on the experiences we have had delivering services in the UK during Covid-19 and how, prior to the national lockdowns, our service provision tipped more to the needs of the professionals and service rather than the needs of our clients. Although this presentation's focus was around the ALS (MND) community, there are far-reaching implications for services to all our clients regardless of diagnosis or need. What was apparent from all the presentations which discussed remote working is that professionals delivering support to clients remotely require time, equipment and training in order to ensure that quality of service provision is not compromised.



Another key theme emerging from many presentations was the impact of Covid-19 and clients experience of social isolation. For many of our clients, social isolation was of concern even prior to the pandemic and this has been further compounded by the need for social distancing. Assistive Technology can provide a means by which people with disabilities can access, connect and maintain relationships with others leading to improved mental wellbeing and increase in quality of life.

Social isolation has been significant experience for school aged children during this past year and I was particularly inspired by presentations that detailed ideas and projects that tackled this issue. A Case Example of AT service provision via telehealth presented by Denee Kroeger (OT) and Caroline Scott (Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist) of Shriners Hospitals for Children, Portland was a great example of this. They detailed projects that focused on meeting the aims of different activities and levels of participation wanting to be achieved as identified by the client themselves (International Classification of Function) whilst tackling the complex environmental and personal factors that the pandemic had raised. By using the Canadian Outcome Performance Measure (COPM) they were able to measure both performance and satisfaction from the client's own perspective and saw gains in each of these areas despite a different service model (telehealth versus face to face). This presentation, alongside others was reassuring in detailing achievable and measurable outcomes for clients using remote and telehealth methods of service delivery and the value of models of assessment which place the client and their aspirations firmly at the centre of the process.

With these models of assessment, provision, and methods of service delivery in mind, the ATIA conference also offers the opportunity to appraise the range of assistive technologies to meet the aspirations and goals of clients. So often, it is easy to get excited by new and developing technologies to the point of it becoming shiny object syndrome – distracted by the capability



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and innovation of any new technology without having a clear rationale as to how it will meet the needs of the client as identified themselves. The incorporation of evidence-based intervention and strategy ideas gathered from the wide range of good quality presentations offered at ATIA 2021 with the opportunity to connect with assistive technology suppliers showcasing their products at the conference allowed for a deeper level of reflection and the opportunity to appraise the relevance of the options being offered.

Perhaps the overwhelmingly beneficial aspect of ATIA 2021 for me, has been the opportunity to connect and chat with people involved in the field of AT from around the world. Making connections via the social and chat opportunities offered during the conference, as well as discovering ways to continue these connections beyond this year's conference, such as through social media, gave a sense of being truly connected and at the centre of ideas and innovation as well as the mutual support these connections offer.



Presentations such as The Assistive Technology Policy Landscape: Policy Adapting to a Global Pandemic, presented by panel members from the Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP) and the Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center on the state of AT policy and programs in 2020 were particularly beneficial in learning how other countries such as the USA have been tackling broader AT considerations at a policy level both during the pandemic and for the purposes of future policy and service planning.

ATIA 2021 – AT Connected may have been my first experience of this conference but given the variety of presentations and offered and the quality of speakers presenting – it certainly won't be my last!