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Keynote Address

Utilization of Technical Aids for Supporting the Lives of Persons with Disabilities

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1. Preface

We enjoy a convenient and comfortable life by the use of various kinds of tools and technologies. For example, to get something placed on a high place, we use ladders and stools. Likewise, persons with disabilities use ladders called "Assistive Technology" (AT). If they can do something using AT, they will be able to see a new world.
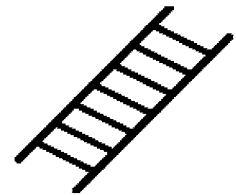
Someone might be thinking that the "ladders" here seem to be centered around hardware such as devices and technologies, but such is not true. Although hardware is important, more important is "software" or the way of thinking and how to utilize it. Below are the key points believed to be important in learning AT.

2. Key points

(1) Ideas as to disabilities and independence of life

It is important to correctly understand disability. But more important is to understand that we all have disabilities. Disabilities are not something cannot be indifferent to all of the 'ordinary' people. There are people who wear eyeglasses. But not so many of them think that they have visual 'disabilities'. Another very important thing is to think that we happen to be able to do so many things at now ("Temporary Abled"). What this means greatly changes depending on whether we focus on the young people or the elderly people who will further increase in the future.

It is also important to learn what it means for a person with disability to lead an independent

life. It is a fact that there are views such as that "Independence means that one can do everything on his/her own" or "If one needs others' help, such cannot be said as independence". However, the views are changing greatly, to one that says that if there are things that a person wants to do, there is no reason for him not to seek others' help. What I believe important is to listen to 'what they want' of persons with disabilities, rather than forcing the caregiver's values on them.

(2) Understanding the needs

Persons with disabilities have diverse needs. Moreover, such needs are sometime not apparent. Some needs are hidden deep inside. We sometimes mistake superficial needs for true needs. There are often cases that though our efforts seemed to have succeeded, in time, persons with disabilities realize that "This was not what I wanted". In such cases, the chances are that what we thought were the true needs were not so. Then, is there a person who can tell the true needs from the beginning? The answer is no. Even experts who have many years of clinical experiences cannot identify the true needs so easily. The true needs are something that must be discovered with the efforts of all team members including persons with disabilities, at the center, their family members, helpers, caregivers and others.
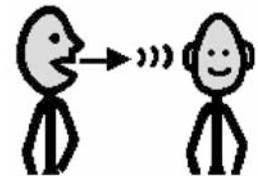
(3) Techniques and technical aids

There are often cases where people have diverse knowledge concerning technical aids that use advanced technologies, but lack knowledge of simple techniques.

Even a simple tool could greatly affect a person's power of expression and way of life if it is properly used. It is desirable to acquire basic knowledge of diverse techniques and technical aids, from Low-tech to High-tech.

(4) Adaptive techniques/strategies

The desirable form of assistance is to help persons with disabilities make choices and decisions on their own. In reality, however, there are many cases in which persons with disabilities cannot tell what they should select. The important thing is to give them the ability to select. This ability means for persons with disabilities to refine their various needs and discover their true needs. It also means to discover the specific technologies and assistive devices to secure the assistance matching such needs. In this respect, 'mediators' such as AT coordinators and AT practitioners play a major role. It will be necessary to fully understand the characteristics and ways of use of individual techniques and technical aids. Also required is adaptive techniques or strategies that has taken into account the actual occasions of use.

(5) Support systems

"Support systems" here include the following: the educational support systems for people to acquire correct knowledge of devices and adaptive techniques; the system of financial support for persons with disabilities to acquire necessary devices; the support systems to ensure that persons with disabilities can use these devices safely and without worrying in their daily lives; and information databases that anyone can use at any time to find out what kind of support systems are available.

There is the reality that there are great regional differences in support systems depending on the countries and regions. However, such differences are expected to decrease gradually and steadily, with the spread of correct knowledge about assistive technologies.

There are also changes in the composition of the engineers of assistive technology, due to the appearance of technical volunteers. Technical volunteers are steadily increasing in various regions and playing major roles. But here, also, it is essential to spread the correct knowledge and adaptive techniques. Instead of providing self-complacent assistance or making such decisions, it is essential for these volunteers to provide assistance by fully discussing with fellow volunteers. It is also desirable for them to carry out activities by utilizing the diverse social resources available locally.

3. Conclusion

I believe there are three viewpoints in understanding persons with disabilities. The first viewpoint is that of an observer. It is very important in objectively understanding the overall image of persons with disabilities. The second viewpoint is that of a partner. It is also very important in providing carefully thought-out services in meeting with each person with disabilities. The third viewpoint is that of a sympathizer, in other words that of the person with disability him/herself. Medical personnel will look at patients as targets of medical services. They may rarely see them as people who are leading the same kinds of lives as themselves. An essential task responsible to us is to understand as much as possible the patients' feelings and the world they are looking at.
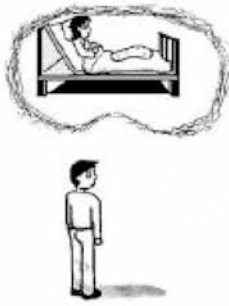
The viewpoint as an observer   The viewpoint as a partner

The viewpoint as a sympathizer

Three Viewpoints to Look at the Person with Disabilities (illustrated by Ayumi Kurino)

I have hereinabove discussed the main points believed to be important when persons with disabilities use assistive devices.

Technologies are sure to progress in the future, and the environment of persons with disabilities will change greatly. However, what will not change are the desires of persons with disabilities to pursue self-realization and the feelings of those who want to assist them to do so.

I sincerely hope that this keynote address would occasion exchanges among the people of the Asia-Pacific region concerning the utilization of technical aids for persons with disabilities. (The manuscript of the keynote address was originally written by the author in Japanese and translated into English by NISE.)