

Computer Training for the Recently Injured in Australia

A new programme in Australia brings together a large array of partners to help people who have recently sustained spinal cord injuries. Early on in the rehabilitation process, the programme introduces people to the possibilities of computer-related employment. In fact, the Spinal Cord Project – with its computer course – actually takes place in the rehabilitation unit of three hospitals.

The New South Wales Board of Vocational and Further Education, IBM, Telstra Communications, the Australian National Training Authority and the Council for the Encouragement of Philanthropy in Australia, variously support the programme, which began in July 2001. IBM, for instance, donated laptop and desktop equipment. Telstra provided and installed the communication capability. The Department of Education provided an initial grant of AUS\$100,000 (US\$60,000) to cover the salary of a manager and to provide teaching resources. Many organizations and individuals, including occupational therapists, offer their services for free.

The initial course was a 12-month pilot project conducted by instructors from the Northern Sydney Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and the Open Training and Education Network. Participants' knowledge dictated which skills the course covered. Several participants, for instance, had never touched a computer. One man, however, worked regularly with a computer. He learned more advanced techniques such as Web design and created a Web site for the programme while the other participants focused on basic computer literacy.

The project idea originated with Mark Bagshaw, international marketing manager, IBM Australasia, a wheelchair user. After surviving a diving accident that resulted in quadriplegia, he understood the value of the early introduction of training options to rehabilitation patients. "People want to know that their life hasn't come to an end, that they will be able to work and take part in all aspects of life," he says. "At the simplest level, our programme helped to put people on a positive path and showed them, first hand, how education and technology could help them achieve their goals."

According to Holly Roberts, Mr. Bagshaw's colleague, other programmes for people with spinal cord injuries often require individuals to delay training until the completion of their rehabilitation. But the waiting period can be long, painful and depressing. "The point of our programme," Ms. Roberts explains, "is to work as quickly as possible on people's self-esteem by showing them how they can adapt their lives and continue to help themselves through such services as the Internet." The course is meant to show them new career options as well, if need be. And it gives them something to do during the rehabilitation process.

Altogether, about ten partners shaped the original concept and implemented the programme in the hospitals. It was not an easy idea to pull together, but the results were immediate. Of the 31 original participants, about 21 of them moved on to or intended to pursue further vocational study in computers. Moreover, most have positive vocational and educational expectations as result of the access to technology made possible by the programme. According to their comments, the training gave them a sense of accomplishment and relieved boredom.

Those who finished the course received a small grant of AUS\$5,000 (US\$2,800) to purchase equipment or continue their courses.

The programme has been so successful that the New South Wales Minister for Education, IBM and Telstra have agreed to expand the programme's reach throughout Australia.

For More Information

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