

Communications Dispute

The Age ([Link](#)), Michelle Griffin, 10 October 2011

A controversial communication technique will be reviewed by the state government after a legal dispute over the intellectual capacity of a woman with severe cerebral palsy.

Disability agency Scope has been commissioned by the Department of Human Services to assess communication aides who help the non-verbal to communicate by methods such as guiding their hands across alphabet board

The technique, known as "facilitated communication", will be part of a state-funded study of all assisted communication programs for the disabled.

In May, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the DHS to ban Dr Rosemary Crossley from taking 49-year-old client Leonie McFarlane, who has severe cerebral palsy, to Adelaide for a conference. Ms McFarlane's parents objected because they believed their daughter did not have the intellectual ability to co-write a power-point presentation on her life.

The presentation was co-written with Ms McFarlane's childhood friend, the late Annie McDonald, a non-verbal woman with cerebral palsy who won the right to make her own decisions in the Supreme Court in 1980.

While the McFarlanes and Dr Crossley have reached a settlement over visitation rights at VCAT - the details of which remain confidential - the 30-year debate about facilitated communication rages on.

Dr Crossley said she was concerned about "the adversarial nature" of the DHS approach to the review, as the department consulted emeritus RMIT Professor Alan Hudson, a critic of facilitated communication, during the legal dispute.

"I could understand there being scepticism, but that was when there were problems 20 years ago," she said. "Since then ... the technology has got better, our techniques have improved, the knowledge of what are and are not appropriate validation strategies have improved considerably."

VALID (Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability) on its website has denounced facilitated communication as "quackery", warning parents of its clients to reject Dr Crossley's agency – "DEAL COMMUNICATIONS".

"People risk being exposed to something which is completely unvalidated and potentially manipulative," said its executive officer Kevin Stone.

Supporters of Dr Crossley's methods are calling on the state government to validate her communication methods.

"The risk is that people coming through, children with autism or cerebral palsy, will not be given that chance to communicate if policies or mindsets are hardened against it," said Communications Rights Australia advocate Eden Parris.

Tim Chan, an autistic student who was taught to use a talking keyboard by Dr Crossley when he was nine, has released a letter of support, saying: "If I had not learned to use facilitated communication, it would have been impossible for me to show other people what I already know, and how I think and feel."

At his home, the 17-year-old answered questions independently, his mother Sarah Chan's hand on his shoulder. Asked if his aides had always typed what he intended, Mr Chan typed: "I think it was mostly things I want to say but at times we are all influencing one another."