n early 2015, Occupational Therapists from Worcestershire Health & Care NHS Trust’s thriving & innovative Community Stroke Service wanted to improve the quality of information they were providing to stroke survivors with cognitive or language difficulties. The team realised that understanding cognitive changes was a top priority for service users, carers and all health care professionals. Existing literature was too busy, too detailed and didn’t lend itself to being customised for people with cognitive or language difficulties.

Recognising that many of their clients found apps easy & engaging, the team set out to create their own app to solve the information problem. The app needed to be simple to follow, uncluttered, and enable people with cognitive difficulties to easily access the information that was relevant to them.

But how do you build an app??

The team didn’t know

Five Occupational Therapists wrote their vision and ideas of content for the app on flipchart paper during a team meeting. It was messy. It was unrefined and did not feel very professional. We used lots of paper. We had no idea how this would become an app, but we were optimists.

Ideas were structured using the cognitive hierarchy based on work by Warren & Grieve. Each team member researched an area to ensure that information included was up to date and reflected current clinical practice. Each section was then written to contain an overview of the cognitive skill in aphasia-friendly language. Some frequently issued general advice was also included, to encourage users to regularly refer to the app.

Speech & Language Therapy colleagues supported the development of the language pages, whilst nursing colleagues contributed to advice around fatigue. All content reflected the advice given by the team routinely and as such the content was appraised by service users. Once the team was happy with the content, it was handed over to the Trust’s communications department. It was assumed that was the end of our role and we looked forward to seeing the app in all its glory.

The app communications department liaised to create their own app to solve the information problem. The communications team wanted to improve the quality of service wanted to improve the quality of information they were providing to stroke survivors with cognitive or language difficulties. The team realised that understanding cognitive changes was a top priority for service users, carers and all health care professionals. Existing literature was too busy, too detailed and didn’t lend itself to being customised for people with cognitive or language difficulties.

Assuming that the communications team would be able to follow the plans, select appropriate images, layouts and fonts and keep the app simple to use was naive. LOTS of time passed waiting for the build process to be completed. At one point the entire contents were lost by the software company – fortunately everything was backed up by the team. Staff left the team and new members joined. Whilst this was frustrating, it was treated as a positive opportunity for peer review.

Finally, in December 2018, the app was live (but only on an Android device). Only now could we start the process of trialling it with clients to see how the app format compared with the verbal and paper-based options previously used.

Service user feedback included:

- App not opening fully
- Aim at either stroke survivor or carer
- Include secondary prevention information
- Include specific section on fatigue

The app is currently “resting” awaiting staffing issues to be resolved before moving on to a formal review process.

Top Tips from the team for developing an app:

- Do have a go – you will learn so much from the process
- Always liaise directly with the software company!
- Analyse feedback regularly – set time aside every month
- Follow a project plan: Plan → Do → Study → Act

References:

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