

Computers for injured people

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The reasonable cost of computer equipment and related expenses has become established as a legitimate head of damages in personal injury cases. This has occurred because of the significant benefits this technology offers people with disabilities. These disabilities include spinal injuries, cerebral palsy, MS, sensory disabilities (such as vision and hearing impairments) and brain injuries. But they may also include people who have lost the use of one hand.

What benefits does computer technology provide a person with a disability? In general terms, it can help them regain a sense of independence and control over their lives, as well as giving them a means of personal expression and creativity commensurate with their abilities. It gives them options which would otherwise be unavailable to them.

More specifically, we have observed benefits in the following areas:

- Communication, both written and oral
- Control of the home environment
- Control of personal affairs, including finances
- Participation in the family and outside community
- Creativity and personal expression
- Reading
- Study
- Employment
- Recreation

This list of benefits is likely to grow, with new technologies constantly pushing back the frontiers.



Specially designed keyboard

New developments in areas such as virtual reality hold great promise for people with disabilities. Other frontiers include robotics, video conferencing and systems of controlling a computer by eye movements or by the mind itself.

The role which a computer might play in a particular person's life will depend on a number of factors, including their age and stage in life, their previous experience with computers, their physical ability to access a computer and their cognitive capacities. It will also depend on their personal interests and goals, and what other options are available to them. Expert assessments are required to determine these matters, including determining what specialised devices will be needed. A trackball, joystick or head-mounted pointing device may be used instead of a mouse. A smaller or larger keyboard may help. A word prediction system may speed up text entry, as could a system of voice recognition. With ingenuity and perseverance, a method of computer access can be found for virtually everyone. Even if the person is only able to activate a switch with one part of their body, that is sufficient to control most computer functions.

Once it is established that a person is able to use a computer and can obtain benefits in so doing, the task then is to estimate the reasonable costs in such a purchase. These costs should include the cost of hardware, software, environmental controls and special furniture. They should also include the cost of setting up, custom-

ising and training (which may need to involve family members and carers as well).

Recurring costs such as hardware replacement, software upgrades, on site service, telephone support, consumables, Internet access fees and additional household insurance need to be included. The cost of future assessments should also be included.

The Ability Research Centre specialises in providing legal assessments, reports and costings to people who require the aid of computers following personal injury. The Ability staff include occupational therapists, as well as research, technical and administrative staff.

Ability can be contacted by phone on (02) 9809 7466, by fax on (02) 9907 9599 or by email: abilitycorp@spin.net.au



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