

Critical Review:

Does early acceptance and subsequent decision-making regarding augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) for persons with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) positively affect the patient's communication in the end-stages of the disease?

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This critical review examines the effects of AAC use for persons with ALS on communication in the end-stages of

disease) OR (motor speech disorders)] AND [dysarthria]

Reference lists of previously searched articles and related systematic and literature reviews were also used to obtain other relevant studies. The search was limited to articles written in English.

Selection Criteria

Studies included in this critical review paper were required to discuss the acceptance of ALS by the patient, the timeliness of their AAC assessment, the subsequent decision-making regarding AAC, and the outcomes of AAC use on communication. Research subjects included patients with ALS and/or their communication partners. No limits were set on the demographics of the research participants, type or stage of ALS, or study designs; however, only articles dated after 2000 were chosen due to changes in AAC availability and technology in the current century. Literature reviews, position papers, and meta-analyses were excluded from this critical review, except to gain information.

Data Collection

Results of the literature search yielded eight Level IV qualitative research studies that met the above selection criteria. Levels of evidence were based on the Oxford Centre for Evidence-based Medicine Levels of Evidence (OCEBM, 2009). These included interviews and document reviews.

Although Level IV qualitative research is a lower level of evidence for study design (OCEBM, 2009), it is the most appropriate method of conducting research for this population of individuals, since ALS is a very progressive disease and many PALS only live for two to five years after diagnosis (Ball et al., 2010). All of the studies in this critical review are Level IV qualitative research.

Ball, Beukelman, Anderson, Bilyeu, Robertson and Pattee (2007) documented the duration of AAC technology use by 45 PALS and identified the factors that influenced the duration of AAC use, through retrospective document review and interviews of surviving family and caregivers. These researchers concluded that AAC technology plays a sustained role in supporting PALS and their caregivers in functional communication; however, there is considerable variability in the use of AAC devices. They also reported that the decision to choose invasive mechanical ventilation by the person with

obtaining the referral (e.g. doctor would not refer them). The authors found that there is a great need for “AAC finders”, who are usually medical personnel with an awareness of the limitations in communication associated with ALS and the intervention options available

