

Video conferencing at a hospital school

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Our kids are not necessarily ready for education between 9 am and 3.30 pm, so the availability of ICT is 24 hours a day. Not many children have watched a lion undergoing a vasectomy in South Africa or talked to an underwater diver as he swims along the Great Barrier Reef, but the last thing the children at James Brindley School need is traditional education, particularly those here at The Diana, Princess of Wales Children's Hospital.

Staff in the school believe in the power of ICT to engage and motivate sick children to learn, and utilize it in a wide and very creative way. Digital cameras, video diaries, scanning and internal email are all used to encourage the children to try and put their illnesses to one side and focus their energies in a productive manner.



Taking part in a live video link.

One of the most innovative benefits of ICT is video conferencing. Pupils who cannot come down to the main classroom can be video linked to a teacher and become part of the group. Children in isolation due to their illness can easily become very depressed and lonely – video conferencing offers a chance to not only learn, but also socialise and make new friends.

The video conferencing system we use at the school is called 'LiveLan H323'. It is supplied by PictureTel, the worlds most advanced video conferencing company, and maintained by Multisense Communications, which were our suppliers. Back up and support from these companies has been superb.

Our system has five multi point cameras which can be placed anywhere in the hospital as long as there is a network data point handy. The system runs through our PCs. To gain access to a video link you must dial the number of the conference holder. Once the link is up and running, an icon of a phone shows you that the handset is in use.



An American teacher in California discusses 'Earthquakes'.

Control of the video conference is by voice activation. While one person speaks the other people must have their systems on mute. To take control of the conference you take your system off mute and begin speaking. It takes a little practice but you get into a routine after a while. To end a conference you replace the Icon receiver back into its holder, just like a normal phone. The link is then finished.

Pitfalls are common; it is still easy to forget to mute the system while in conference and cause mayhem! The quality of the ISDN line has much to do with the quality of the conference. The system itself is fairly easy to use, and you don't have to be a technical wizard to get to grips with it. Our system does have a whiteboard attachment for interactive written question and answer sessions, or for sending an animated presentation such as *PowerPoint* anywhere in the world.

Video conferencing is not only used for 'lessons'. The Carol Service at Christmas was linked all around



A link to mission control, NASA.

the hospital to children who could not physically make it to the chapel, as well as to a special school in Slough. They could not only watch the service but could interact by joining in the readings and songs.

One of the greatest benefits of video links is that we can communicate on a global level. This was clearly illustrated when we were able to link a young Kosovan refugee who had lost both her grandparents and her younger brother in the Balkan conflict, with friends from her home town of Pristina – the first time in a year that she had had this opportunity. The physical and emotional benefits of this kind of 'education' are beyond measure.



Talking to friends in Kosovo.

We at the Children's Hospital owe a huge debt of gratitude to Maureen James at PictureTel and Peter Romeril and his team at Multisense Communications, whose help and expertise have enabled us to be at the cutting edge of technology.

James Brindley School operates on 12 sites throughout Birmingham and caters for any children who are unable to attend mainstream school due to medical reasons. Our hope is to link all 12 sites via video conferencing and enlarge the ICT family for all our pupils.