

Rings for the memory

Clever use of existing technology helps brain-damaged Albertans keep appointments

KAREN KLEISS
Journal Staff Writer
EDMONTON

Albertans who have survived brain damage are gaining confidence and independence with the help of a powerful new memory aid: the cellphone.

Alberta psychologist Marc Roy and his student, Adam Hughes, are using the ubiquitous gadgets to trigger the memories of clients they work with at the Halvar Johnson Centre for Brain Injury in Ponoka.

The alarm function can benefit those who struggle with a bad memory after a collision or a stroke, such as John, a 58-year-old long-distance trucker.

John — the subject of Roy's case study — suffered a stroke in the right hemisphere of his brain two years ago. The part of his brain that controls language wasn't affected, but John was having a tough time keeping appointments, even with a watch and a day planner in front of him.

"He has trouble with executive functioning," Roy said Saturday at the Alberta Brain Injury Conference in Edmonton, where he presented his findings. "It's just a disconnection between thought and action. He had every intention of getting there, it just didn't happen."

John, which is not his real name,

would routinely show up far too early or too late for his therapy sessions, or he wouldn't show up at all. According to Roy's findings, he was on time for about 26 per cent of the appointments.

Then Roy and Hughes set up his cellphone to ring loudly ten minutes before he had to be somewhere. It was easy to rig up, since John already wore the phone around his neck to stay in touch with family.

Soon, John was showing up on time for 90 per cent of his appointments.

"Cellphones are everywhere and people are familiar with how to use them," Roy said. "And there is no stigma attached to carrying a phone." This is important because some clients are reluctant to carry memory books or other special tools with them to help aid in memory, Roy said.

"The cellphone allowed (John) to have more independence because he could manage his own schedule," he said. "He could take full advantage of his rehabilitation because he wasn't missing sessions."

John was also pleased he was able to be on time — something he prided himself on when he was working as a trucker.

For survivors who can't manage the cellphone on their own, Roy said



GREG SOUTHAM, THE JOURNAL

Psychologist Marc Roy holds up a handy mnemonic tool which returns a measure of independence and confidence to the memory-challenged.

family and caregivers can set up the phone to connect to Internet sites like reqall.com or jott.com, then program the schedule remotely.

The technology could help many people, since 10,000 Albertans survive brain damage each year.

Michael and Nadine Stack think the cellphone trick might work for them. Three years ago, Michael was driving down the Whitemud when a wheel flew off a truck in front of him and crashed through the windshield. He was in a coma for two months, in hospital for four more

and is still recovering.

"My memory's a real bad one," he said on Saturday after Roy's presentation. "I used to be able to remember a lot, now it's a real struggle."

A businessman, Michael used to be on his cellphone constantly. But after the collision, he and Nadine saw no need for one, until now. "It would certainly help him in taking ownership and responsibility for his own schedule," Nadine said. "It would make him more independent and that's what we're working towards."

kkleiss@thejournal.canwest.com