MANA-Calendar™

Description
The Talking Head MANA-Calendar is a computer-generated person (head and shoulders) that can remind people about appointments through a calendar application. Appointments can be entered using the Google Calendar system, by a family member, carer, friend, or perhaps even health provider to remind the user about events or activities for the day. Only approved people will have access to the calendar.

Unique characteristics
Although it is computer based technology, the Talking Head operates in a very natural way which allows it to ‘respond intelligently’ to a range of questions or comments from the user. The Head is able to recognise when a person is in the room, thus increasing its human-like qualities.

Benefits
People with early onset dementia often remain at home and are supported by a carer who, naturally, cannot be present at all times but is worried that the cared for person will forget routine activities, such as eating lunch. The Calendar provides some comfort to carers, knowing that they can set reminders such as ‘Your lunch is in the fridge’, and these will be given to the user at the appropriate time in a ‘natural’ way.

Another advantage that MANA-Calendar provides is that it is flexible. Carers can put in reminders from home, at work, or from any place where they have access to the internet. The MANA-Calendar system will automatically update and advise the user of the reminder at the appropriate time.

For example, a carer may be at work and remember that a relative will be visiting the user today. Using the Google Calendar system on the internet, the carer can set a reminder for the user and MANA-Calendar will automatically update and advise the user that the relative will be visiting at the set time.

What equipment is required?
MANA-Calendar is displayed on a monitor or screen but behind the scenes the software works by using an integrated system which includes a computer, camera, microphone and speakers. No keyboard or mouse is required for operation.

Do users or carers need special training to use MANA-Calendar?
No, the interaction that users will have with MANA-Calendar is through verbal operation. Carers will need basic knowledge of how to set up ‘reminders’ for the user with the standard Google Calendar application.

What stage is the current project at?
At present, the technology has been developed to prototype stage using Medical Device Partnering Program funding, in conjunction with user input from Alzheimer’s SA.

Next Steps
In conjunction with Alzheimer’s SA, the Medical Device Partnering Program will be coordinating a product trial. For more information about the trial, please contact the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

Medical Device Partnering Program
The Medical Device Partnering Program is a collaboration between researchers, end-users and industry to assist with the development of medical devices and assistive technologies with market potential. It is supported by the South Australian State Government through the Premier’s Science and Research Fund.

MANA-Calendar, assisted in its development through the Medical Device Partnering Program, is the first product developed to a prototype stage from the original ‘thinking head’ research at Flinders University. Professor David Powers, leader of the MANA project team, has research interests in the area of Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science and its practical applications.