

CONNECTIONS

Supporting all people to engage in activities they find meaningful

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Connect and Collaborate

Collaborating to Build Educator Capacity

Creating a Healthier Relationship with Your Mind

A Clinic for the Community, in the Community

Occupational
Therapy AUSTRALIA 

SHARING OUR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Connecting, Collaborating and Adapting OT Practice in a COVID-19 World

Nick Warren, Manager of Marketing and Community Relations at Solve Disability Solutions

Occupational Therapists are Fundamental Members of Essential Health Services

Working alongside or in collaboration with other practices, allied health professionals are a health-system juncture where inter-connected practice and multi-disciplinary teamwork adapt and move in unison in a rapidly changing world. From the days of 'business-as-usual' to the introductions of new and reformed health systems (such as the NDIS) and disaster response, allied-health professionals are pivoting on the back foot of a global crisis by introducing dynamic approaches and strengthening networks to ensure the continuity of their essential services.

In Victoria, occupational therapists at Solve Disability Solutions (solve.org.au) leverage their assistive technology specialty to work across a multi-industry community of technical volunteers and experts to support clients Victoria-wide. Collaborating with industries and professionals (such as bio-medical engineers, architects, welders, electricians, commercial AT suppliers), our occupational therapists build and connect to networks and knowledge-banks of expertise, working together to design and deliver fit-for-person solutions to help their clients achieve their goals.



Rosemary Nolan, Deputy CEO – Solve Disability Solutions, manages a team of statewide occupational therapists and OT student placements, specialising in custom-assistive technology and capacity-building therapy services (Kew, Victoria)

Staying Connected

Working as part of a national network of therapists (*TAD Australia*), occupational therapists go beyond borders to stay connected to expansive networks of allied health professionals through memberships with peak bodies, alliances, associations and communities of practice including:

- **National Assistive Technology Alliance (NATA):** NATA was initiated in April 2017 and is now a community of practice of nearly 20 peak national stakeholders collaborating and connecting with the AT sector in response to rapid policy change.
- **Australian Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology Association (ARATA):** ARATA is a national association whose

purpose is to serve as a forum for information sharing and liaison between people who are involved with the use, prescription, customisation, supply and ongoing support of assistive technology.

Outside their active roles in professional networks, Solve occupational therapists connect and liaise with local equipment providers who complement their *'better outcomes through fit-for-person solutions'* philosophy to identify and access safe, innovative and tailored technologies for their clients. If it's not available, safe or suitable, our occupational therapists turn to their internal technical team to build it from the ground up.

New Ways to Connect

Connecting with providers and allied-health networks is more than collecting business cards at expos and taking note of the name of the provider you placed an order with. It's about connecting and building relationships using a variety of methods and technologies.



Shane Hryhorec, Managing Director – Push Mobility, delivers a national information and education webinar to 300 allied-health professionals across Australia (Abbotsford, Victoria)

“It’s all about building relationships with other providers who understand their products and the people that use them,” says senior occupational therapist Liz Doyle.

National mobility specialists *Push Mobility* (pushmobility.com) take a person-centred approach in the selection and provision of disability equipment. Owned and operated by wheelchair users, *Push Mobility* focuses on increasing access to assistive technology

that is *'fun, exciting and pushes the boundaries of what disability equipment should be.'*

Collaborating with therapists and end users is an essential part of their business and service.

In early April 2020, *Push* had two state-based community engagement events scheduled in Melbourne and Brisbane. Within days of the Level-3 COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the *Push* team quickly restructured both events into virtual format to broadcast nationally from their Abbotsford (Victoria) warehouse.

An impressive 300 allied-health professionals and students across Australia registered for a national education and professional development day as a part of their continued education.

“On a good day (when there isn’t a pandemic happening), we have anywhere from 30 to 40 therapists on hand, so to get over 300 people involved in a single event is pretty great,” says managing director Shane Hryhorec.

The virtual event featured Assistive Technology (AT) suppliers, AT users and occupational therapists who shared their unique experiences, collaborative processes and tips for adapting practice in the times of natural disasters such as the recent bushfires and COVID-19 pandemic.

“Assistive technologies and allied health services are essential – the only option for us was to find the best platform to engage with the widest audience of therapists,” says Shane Hryhorec.



Mary, Need Knower – TOM: Melbourne Makethon (2019) demonstrating her custom exercise machine with her Maker team at FAB9 (Footscray, Victoria)

Telehealth in Practice

In 2011, the Australian Government introduced a Telehealth initiative. Designed to use telecommunication technologies to exchange health information and provide health-care services across geographic, time, social and cultural barriers, its primary purpose has been to improve access to health-care services for patients who live in regional, rural and remote areas.

Today, *Telehealth* services are being widely implemented into practice in instances where services are disrupted, delayed or inaccessible, as experienced in the 2019-20 bushfires and more recently during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Video-conferencing is one of the main methods for delivering telehealth services offering access to clients and providers using everyday devices. Telehealth appointments are also now fully endorsed and funded through Medicare and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

“Integrating new technologies helps expand, strengthen and diversify services,” says Shane Hryhorec.

Since the 2019-20 bushfires, the NDIS has been rapidly prioritising and implementing disaster-relief supports with reasonable and necessary (budget) flexibility to ensure NDIS participants can flexibly use their funding to access the essential services, technologies and support they need, especially in times of crisis. Most recently, budget flexibility was extended to include communications devices such as tablets, monitors and cameras.

Collaborating to Build a New Service and AT Marketplace

Our occupational therapists stay ahead of the innovative curve by teaming up with the global community, *Tikkun Olam Makers* aka *TOM: Melbourne* (tommelbourne.org). TOM creates and builds products that improve the lives of people living with a disability, where there is no obvious or current market solution. They work with people with a disability who have a specific need (*Need-Knowers*) and connect



Makers, Team COVID-19 PPE Solutions – TOM Global, demonstrate their 3D-printed PRUSA Protective Face Shield – RC3, developed to address global PPE shortages during COVID-19

them with a diverse group of professionals, including engineers, industrial designers, health professionals and tradespeople (*Makers*). Together they design and build products that solve a complex problem and improve the everyday life of the *Need-Knower*.

Applying clinical expertise as part of a *Makers* team, occupational therapists play a vital role in TOM’s immersive hackathon-style co-design activities to develop safe, new and innovative assistive technology solutions to be shared with the world.

Once a solution has been identified, built, trialled and tested it is added to a global *open-source* product database (tomglobal.org), enabling other individuals, health professionals and communities around the world to have equitable access to a vast collection of innovative solutions and concepts.

Collaborating to Combat COVID-19

As the global response to the COVID-19 crisis put restrictions on the public, frontline health-care workers experienced a different type of restrictive impact, lacking essential protective equipment such as masks and shields. *TOM* connected with communities across the globe to identify immediate challenges relating to the Coronavirus and co-developing

open-source solutions to support hospitals, treatment centres, and households.

Within days of the World Health Organisation (WHO) announcing the COVID-19 outbreak was indeed a *pandemic*, *TOM: Melbourne* created an online TOM Support Network via Facebook to keep their community of therapists, *Makers* and *Need Knowers* connected.

“This (Facebook group) is a safe place to share, express and interact during the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage posts from *Need-Knowers* and *Makers* needing support and wanting to offer a helping hand to others,” says *TOM: Melbourne*

Whether you are an occupational therapist in metropolitan or regional Australia, a student, or building a private practice or working as part of a large allied-health team, there are ample opportunities to connect, collaborate and adapt your practice and improve outcomes for your clients. It’s a challenging time for the world but also an exciting time to be an allied-health professional in Australia.

About the Author

Nick Warren is a marketing and communications professional based in Melbourne. Currently, Nick is the Manager of Marketing & Community Relations at Solve Disability Solutions, Project Manager for TAD Australia, and serves on the Board of Directors of Accessible Beaches Australia.