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## Montco speech pathology firm's new twist on telemedicine

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Orna Kempler-Azulay has a new strategy to make it easier for her company's speech therapists to connect with students and adults in need of their services: teletherapy.

Her company, Abington Speech Pathology Services, in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, has launched a telemedicine initiative called RemoteSpeech. RemoteSpeech allows speech therapy to be delivered by therapists using high-definition video calling over the internet.

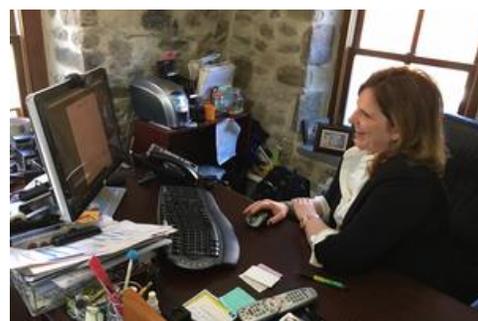
Kempler-Azulay said RemoteSpeech is a way to address the growing problem of cash-strapped school districts which are required to provide such services to students diagnosed with a speech-related disability. As more children are being diagnosed with autism and other learning disabilities, she noted, the supply of speech pathologists is not keeping up with the demand — creating a significant access problem.

"Parents don't care that there's a shortage," she said, noting that her company often encounters difficulties finding therapists willing to go to school in remote, rural or high-crime areas. "This isn't meant to replace therapists meeting face-to-face with a client, but it's a way to provide services when plan A doesn't work and plan B doesn't work."

RemoteSpeech is already being used by five schools among the more than 50 schools the company serves. Later this week, a Children's Hospital of Philadelphia researcher and Abington Speech will present the results of a study involving the RemoteSpeech platform at the America Speech and Hearing Association's annual convention being held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. The convention is expected to bring more than 12,000 pathologists, audiologists, and speech, language, and hearing scientists to the city.

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Erin Heinerichs, clinical director at Abington Speech Pathology Services, said the study involved gathering perception on teletherapy from 20 Philadelphia middle and high school students. Heinerichs said among the findings was 80 percent would prefer to receive speech therapy services on the computer.



JOHN GEORGE

Orna Kempler-Azulay, founder and president of Abington Speech Pathology Services, demonstrating a teletherapy session.

"Kids love it," Kemplar-Azulay said of the teletherapy sessions. "They think it's cool. It's the technology they like to use."

Joseph Donaher, academic and research program director at CHOP's Center for Childhood Communication, said they wanted to conduct a study of teletherapy because it will clearly play an important role in how speech and audio therapy services are delivered.

"When you first hear about telemedicine or teletherapy, you think it's this space-age thing that will happen in the future," he said. "The reality is people are using it today, and using it effectively."

The study CHOP conducted with Abington Speech, Donaher said, intended to gain insight from the perspective of the children receiving both traditional face-to-face therapy and teletherapy. "If the child is not engaged in the therapy and doesn't feel it will work, they are not going to do it," he said.

What they found is the students liked both types of therapy, but 95 percent viewed the teletherapy as effective, while 85 percent thought the face-to-face was effective.

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Using video conference, Abington Speech can deliver its contract therapy services to children in schools or adults at home, making care less expensive because travel time to a rehab facility is eliminated. For a school, Kemplar-Azulay said, the savings can quickly add up to thousands of dollars a year. In addition, family members can participate in sessions by dialing into the video conference with the patient and therapists.

Heinerichs said not every patient is a candidate for telemedicine. "You can have children with multiple disabilities or an adult recovering from a stroke with physical limitations or cognitive impairments that may make it difficult," she said, "but this [service] gives us options, and it's great to have options."

Kemplar-Azulay described the RemoteSpeech service as "another tool in our bag of tricks."

Founded by Kemplar-Zulay in 1999, Abington Speech Pathology Services has grown into a company with \$4 million in annual sales. It has a full-time staff of 17 and 162 contract speech therapists.

Kemplar-Azulay, who serves as the company's president, expanded to the West Coast in 2005 opening an office in Laguna Hills, California. That office accounts for about 10 percent of its total revenues. The bulk of the company's clients are school districts, hospitals and nursing homes in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where it also serves private clients.

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