Can You Hear Me Now?
Mary Beth Parks, R.N.

In a popular commercial for Verizon Wireless, a cell phone tester travels the globe with his phone, asking home base “Can you hear me now?” Many people with ALS identify with that question all too well. We all want our voice to be heard, but for ALS patients the process can be difficult and frustrating.

Thanks to the world of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) having bulbar involvement with ALS doesn’t necessarily mean an end to being heard. Augmentative and Alternative Communication refers to anything that helps you communicate—from simple hand gestures, A-B-C boards, and lettered bracelets to high tech, computerized systems that can detect the tiniest eye movement or even read brain waves.

Many devices are partially covered by health insurance. Medicare covers certain equipment that generates speech, and private insurers may also cover AAC devices for patients with neurological diseases. Reimbursement is never 100%, but if you are a patient in an ALSA or MDA clinic there may be some limited financial assistance to cover your “out of pocket” costs for these devices.

My advice is to be “proactive”… start looking at what’s out there early, when you don’t quite need it. When is it time to turn to Augmentative and Alternative Communication? You might consider planning the transition when people start asking you repeat yourself, or when the computer keyboard is such a challenge you stop e-mailing all the friends who want to keep up with you.

The following is a short list of companies who specialized in providing AAC equipment.

A complete list of AAC providers can be found at www.aacinstitute.org

Dyna Vox Systems (http://www.dynavoxsys.com) 1-800-344-1778
Enkidu Research (http://www.enkidu.net) 1-800-344-1778
LC Technologies (http://www.eyegaze.com) 1-800-393-4293
Prentke Romich (http://www.prentrom.com) 1-800-262-1984
Zygo Industries (http://www.zygo-usa.com) 1-800-234-6006
Gus Communications (http://www.gusinc.com) 1-866.487.1006