That sounds like a plan!

On 30 June 2020, Blind + Low Vision New Zealand announced their new strategic plan for the next four years through to 2024.

In my opinion, the most important aspect of their new plan, is the priority of being people-centred, ensuring the needs of their clients are put first and foremost in their daily operating activities.

The second most important factor is the strong focus on accountability; meaning clients can expect them to do what they say they will do and deliver what they say they will deliver, and expect that they will hold themselves to account if they do not deliver on their promises. This is a very positive step forward in my opinion.

The launch also included an announcement by Minister of Social Development and Disability Issues, Carmel Sepuloni, that the MSD has provided (about $460,000) funding to BLVNZ for the purchase of 3500 Amazon Echo devices.

If you have not had a chance to acquaint yourself with their new plan, I would encourage you to go to their website: www.blindlowvision.org.nz

Retina NZ is encouraged and excited by the opportunities to work collaboratively with BLVNZ and others within the blind sector network towards our shared objectives.

As we move into our new financial year and our reinvigorated work plan, which continues to provide our core services; Information, Awareness and Peer Support, with increased digital influence underpinning those activities as well as up-skilling ourselves with new technology and supporting Retina Youth in their activities. Now that sounds like a plan! - Mike Smith
From the President

My apologies to anyone who has been patiently waiting for the June newsletter. We decided to modify the publication dates, which will now be July, October, January and April.

Hopefully everyone managed to make it safely through lockdown without too much drama? As we enjoy our new normal, hopefully there will be no more community transmission, or selfish sods escaping quarantine.

While every Kiwi has a right to come home, I can’t help thinking the millions of dollars we are spending putting them up in flash hotels, is good money wasted. Not to mention the additional cost of policing and security.

Mandatory self isolation is essentially the same as home detention, so why not just do that? Let people choose to self isolate at home - wearing an ankle bracelet, or do the quarantine in a detention centre.

My new clarity of vision

On the first day of Level 2 Lockdown, I went in to Waikato hospital for cataract surgery. Because of my underlying eye condition (RP) it was agreed we would do it under a general anaesthetic.

Despite having edited Retina’s booklet on Cataracts, I was rather apprehensive because the known side-effects can include swelling in the back of the eye (Macular Oedema), which I already have as a secondary complication of RP.

I’d also never had surgery under general anaesthetic so I was a bit anxious about how the whole process would go. One quandary I did have leading up to the operation was deciding which eye to get done. They had said to me that if the operation went badly they would not risk doing the other one, so it was quite a dilemma to decide whether to risk what sight I had in my good eye for the prospect of clearer vision or hedge my bets and operate on the poorer eye first. So we decided to go with my good eye as that would make the most significant difference and I was pleased that we did.

Hoping the surgeon was “a morning person”, I was in theatre by 8:30 am and an hour later, I was happily snoring away in the recovery room. By 10:30 am I was in a car heading home, thinking how smooth the whole process had been.

The nursing staff both before and after the operation were fantastic they really do go out of their way to be kind.

Apart from having to put drops in my eyes 15 times a day for a month, it was all good. All of the other complications I was concerned about never eventuated, it all turned out fine.

After the operation, with my dominant right eye covered with an eyepatch, I noticed that I could see better than I can usually with my left eye. This appears to be a common anecdote from patients following cataract surgery.

I came to the conclusion that so much of the quality of what you “see” largely relies upon the ability of your brain to process the signal into something it can understand. I’m sure we’ve all had situations where our eyesight seems to be worse when we’re really tired. That will be an article for another day. I did
get some comfort out of the realisation that had there been complications with the surgery, my remaining eyesight may be augmented to some degree by the brain’s image processing ability. Isn’t hindsight a wonderful cure for anxiety?

I think it may be useful for others going through that same dilemma to know that the risk may probably be less than what you imagine it could be, after reading the pre-op pamphlet they give you detailing the risks associated with surgery, including a 1 in 1000 chance of the surgery causing blindness!

Because of my RP and Macular Oedema, I was sceptical how much difference the cataract surgery would actually make. But to my delight, the increased clarity is unbelievably better and just by having that extra clarity has meant that I have reduced my magnification from 6x to 3x, which is a huge difference. I am absolutely elated with the clarity that has been restored to my vision.

Other people noticed how much my mobility has improved, in both familiar and unfamiliar surroundings. I was moving a lot quicker than I had done previously, at a brisk walk rather than a hesitant dawdle.

So if you need Cataract surgery and have an underlying eye condition, I would definitely recommend getting it done under a general anaesthetic. I’ve had people say to me they wouldn’t bother getting their cataracts done, as they’ll go blind anyway.

While it’s most likely just fear talking, even if that is the eventual outcome, isn’t it better to have the clearest view of the world for as long as you’re still able to do so? Hopefully, I can get the other one done before too long.

Retina NZ Membership renewal
For anyone worried about not receiving their membership renewal notice yet, you need not worry. They have been held back so they can be posted out with the newsletter to save us the additional cost of separate postage. For those of you who don’t get the print version of the newsletter, you should receive your renewal notice in the mail before the end of July. If you prefer a copy emailed to you, please contact us: admin@retina.org.nz

Retina NZ AGM
As we announced in our April newsletter, the 2020 Annual General Meeting of Retina NZ will be held in Auckland on September 12th 2020. We have booked the recreation room at Awhina House; at Blind & Low Vision NZ’s Head Office in Parnell. If you cannot make it in person, we will have it on Zoom as well so people can join us online or on their phone. You will need to pre-register to get the proper access information for Zoom.

We will have tea/coffee on arrival from 9:30 am with a start time of 10:00 am. Our keynote speaker, Dr. Keith Gordon will join us from Canada, who will be talking about the phenomena known as Charles Bonnet Syndrome, this condition affects people of all ages and can be very scary until you realise what is causing the hallucinations. Following his talk Keith will do a Q&A session, before lunch. The afternoon session will start about 1:00 pm and will go until about 3:00 pm and will have afternoon tea and social chat until
about 4:30 pm. We have yet to finalise all the afternoon speakers, but GPSOS will demonstrate their personal security alarm.

You can RSVP by phone: 0800 569 849 ext1 or by email: admin@retina.org.nz
For catering purposes it’s important to RSVP. Also, if you need a ride let us know and we’ll do our best to help if we can. We look forward to seeing you there.

Call For Nominations
In accordance with our constitution this notice is the first call for nominations to serve on the Executive Committee of Retina NZ. This is an honorary role and would suit someone who shares our values; Empathy, Respect and Ethical Practice. Applicants must be a financial member of Retina NZ and be nominated and seconded by financial members. Completed nomination forms need to be received by our admin team no later than 5 pm on Friday 31st July. To obtain an induction kit including the nomination form please contact our admin team: admin@retina.org.nz

Stargardt’s Meeting
On Sunday 26th July, Retina NZ will host a meeting for people with Stargardt’s. The meeting will be held via Zoom to include our members from around the country and further afield.

We are collaborating with Retina South Africa so it will be held at 7.30pm in NZ which is 9.30am in South Africa.

Claudette Medefindt will be updating the group on the Stargardt’s clinical trial they are part of as well as latest research and a summary of the genetic mutations associated with Stargardt’s.

Then Retina SA Chairman, James Capes, a Stargardt’s patient himself, will talk about his daily challenges living with Stargardt’s and the range of technology and assistive devices he uses to make daily living more manageable.

As this is a Zoom meeting you will require log in details depending on whether you join on your computer, tablet, or smartphone. There will also be the option to just dial in on a telephone. Anyone interested in participating can register with our admin: 0800 569 849 ext 1 or email: admin@retina.org.nz

2020 RNZFB Board Elections
The Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (RNZFB) seeks expressions of interest from those who are thinking of standing in the 2020 RNZFB Board Elections to attend an information day, (If sufficient interest is shown) for prospective nominees on Saturday 1 August 2020 in Auckland.

This year, three vacancies for general seats exist on the RNZFB Board. The three incumbent directors whose terms are up for election this year are Martine Abel-Williamson, Fraser Alexander and Keith Appleton. These Directors may wish to stand again. To register your interest with the Board Secretary, Jane Moore, telephone: 09 355 6894 or email: jamoore@blindlowvision.org.nz by Friday 17 July 2020.

Well that’s all for now, enjoy the read and take care. Cheers!

Mike Smith – President
0278040221
president@retina.org.nz
Living With Stargardt’s
Two sisters - two very different stories.

Jade’s story …
My special ability is Stargardt macular degeneration. This is a genetic eye disorder that causes progressive vision loss and effects the centre of the retina.

I am South African born and moved to New Zealand with my family when I was 13. I am the eldest of four children and my youngest sibling, Lorna has the same condition.

When I was 7 years old, I started school, which I enjoyed and especially loved reading. Then it happened …

I woke up, got ready for school just like I did every other day, I didn’t notice anything different at first until I got to school. I sat down at my desk which was situated about 2 metres from the blackboard. Usually I had no issue with reading what was written on the board, however on this day I remember looking up and thinking “why is it so fuzzy?”

I told my teacher and parents and over the course of about 4 years I went to countless optometrists and specialists who could not find any reason why my vision was deteriorating.

I was having a lot of trouble at school at this point, my teachers were convinced that because doctors were unable to diagnose me, that I was lazy and didn’t want to do my schoolwork, so I was making up excuses. As a child it was hard for me to understand why they were treating me differently and why they wouldn’t believe me. I started to hate going to school and would beg my parents to let me stay home. I suffered severe bullying; not from my classmates, but from a teacher!

I couldn’t read the board properly, and I was too scared to ask to be moved closer because she would always reply: “what do you mean you can’t see? It’s not far away, sit down and do the work properly or I’ll give you detention”. She would constantly read my work out to the class with the purpose of making fun of me and all the mistakes I made, encouraging the class to do the same and laugh at me.

This would go on for about two years before I moved. I can’t even tell you how many times this happened, how many lunch breaks I spent crying in the bathroom, wondering why this was happening and what I had done to deserve this.

As a child you are taught to trust the adults around you, your parents, family, teachers etc. These are the people who are meant to help, protect and teach you, and have your best interests at heart. So, when one of those fail you and torment you, the trust and feeling that you are safe disappears and is replaced with fear and confusion. For a child that is so hard to understand, and I've lived with the after-effects ever since.

When I was 12, I was finally diagnosed with Stargardts. At the time I didn’t know what that meant, I just know that I felt relieved that finally people would know I wasn’t making it up.

Continued over page …
It was the following year that my family moved to New Zealand. I had made the decision that (when I started year 9) I wasn’t going to tell anyone about my vision impairment because of what happened at my previous school.

I thought that if I stayed quiet, no one would have the opportunity to make fun of me and make me feel the way that teacher did. I wouldn’t admit it to myself for a very long time, but I was in denial about my vision loss and never really dealt with the grieving process. This obviously didn’t work, and my schoolwork suffered.

I was the first vision impaired student that Matamata College had at the time. Through the efforts of my school and my parents I became a member of Blind Low Vision NZ. Now if I am being completely honest, I wanted nothing to do with them at first. I didn’t want to risk standing out and bringing attention to myself. I felt very self-conscious, embarrassed for people to know about my impairment. I was also scared that history would repeat itself and I would become known for being the blind girl. I wanted to fit in and so I was extremely stubborn and reluctant to try anything new, like technology or having support in-class.

It took a lot of patience & perseverance by my support team, but I finally agreed to accept their help. With the help of the Foundation and my teacher aid, I rediscovered my love for reading.

I also found a love for writing and sewing and found myself earning top marks in my classes until I finished high school and even attending prize-giving.

Turns out I actually was a smart cookie, I just needed that extra bit of help. I still had a lot of anxiety and I was still in the mindset of not talking about my vision impairment with people I wasn’t close to.

I became dependent on routines and being in my comfort bubble. Whenever I felt like that was being threatened or about to change, my anxiety would flare up and I would shut down. It didn’t help when my classmates would constantly tear me down and say I was only doing so well because my teacher aid was doing all the work for me, which was not the case, I promise!

In 2010. I was 18, finished with school and trying to adjust to a new routine and figure out what I wanted to do with my life and who I wanted to be. This turned out to be easier said than done.

I genuinely thought for the longest time that having a vision impairment, I would never have the opportunity to find work, that no one would want to employ a blind person when they could hire someone “normal”. I felt like this was proven true as I was unable to find work.

The idea of going on to further study terrified me and every time I felt rejected or felt like I couldn’t do anything it knocked me back and eventually, I found myself in the position where I stopped trying.

I had convinced myself that I would never be able to get work or make something of myself.

My confidence was completely gone, and I felt like I had no real value in life and to the people around me.
Over the past few years I have come to the realisation that no one can go through life on their own. Regardless of whether you have some form of disability, we all need support and help from time to time, but if that support is lacking or doesn’t exist, you can find yourself feeling stuck and that you are a burden to the people around you. I realised this the most when I was in a relationship that lasted 7 years.

Any time I found the courage to want to try something new, whether it was a hobby, at-home study or even volunteer work, my partner at the time would ask me things like “why bother, you know you can’t get anything out of this” or “you can’t do this”.

He would also constantly complain when I would ask him to drive me to appointments or to go see my family, and he was embarrassed to tell people about my vision impairment, and he was never shy about showing it.

You must be wondering, ‘Well Jade, why the heck would you stay with someone like that?’ Let me tell you, I wondered the same thing. I felt like I would never be able to find anyone who would accept me the way that I am. That beggars can’t be choosers if you get what I mean. I felt stuck and like I said I thrived on routine and being in my comfort bubble. Although it sounds terrible, at the time I felt like I’d rather be unhappy than face the terrifying notion of change.

I honestly can’t tell you what it was, but I reached a point where I knew if I didn’t change something, I would continue in this cycle. Not only in regards to my relationship, but in my life in general.

It’s as if my brain just said, ‘ENOUGH IS ENOUGH’. I made a very abrupt decision, I packed my bags and I left the home that we shared and the town I had called home for the last 11 years. I moved to Hamilton where the rest of my family had moved to and I started over. So now at this point I was 24, still had no idea what I was doing or where I was going in life, but I felt free.

For the first time I was on my own and even though I knew it would take time I knew this was my time to be my own person and find my path in life. I am 27 years old now as I am writing this, and I can say with absolute certainty that I made the right decision and I am so happy I was able to find the strength to do so. I have been able to work through a lot of the noise in my head.

Over the years I have discovered that I am not alone. I have met so many amazing and inspiring people from all walks of life, who have dealt with the same feelings and fears, who have accomplished so many amazing things.

I have become so much more self-aware and confident. Even though my anxiety is an ongoing battle, I have found the most amazing support through my family, Blind Low Vision NZ, Retina NZ and Workbridge. I have also recently been employed for the first time in my life.

With everything going on in the world the last thing I expected was to find work, with so many people struggling and losing their jobs, I feel incredibly lucky and thankful that I have been given this opportunity. I am now a very proud member of the GPSOS team and the level of support and guidance I
have received has been amazing. We call ourselves SOS Agents and I can honestly say I absolutely love my job and the incredible and inspiring people that I work with.

Finally, I want to end this by saying that I always thought that because of my impairment, it would never be possible to live a “normal” life.

It is the thing that makes me different and being different is awesome. I am not defined by my disability, but it is a part of who I am and always will be, and I wouldn’t be the person I am today if I hadn’t gone through all of those experiences.

I still have a long way to go, but I am proud to say that I am much more confident and I am learning and growing more and more each day to become the best version of myself.

I look forward to the future with so much hope and excitement and I can’t wait to see where I end up.

Remember, be kind to those around you. You never know what someone is going through or what their story is, but also be kind to yourself and know that you are unique and wonderful.

– Jade Coker

Lorna’s Story …

My name is Lorna, I am 21 and I have a vision impairment called Stargardts Macular Degeneration. This condition is a genetic eye disorder that causes progressive vision loss. This disorder effects the centre of the retina.

I emigrated from South Africa to New Zealand at the age of 6 and was unofficially diagnosed with my eye condition at the age of 5 due to my older sister, Jade being diagnosed with the same condition. I never really noticed my vision impairment at that age because, well, I didn’t even know what was going on. All of that changed when we moved to New Zealand.

My mum, dad and two older brothers were able to get Permanent Residency, but Jade and I did not due to our disability and the fact that Immigration thought we would be a liability to the country. But that’s a different story for another time.

When I was in Primary School, in a little town called Matamata, I was not able to get the support I needed from BLENNZ as I wasn’t a Permanent Resident yet. And being the only vision impaired person in my Primary School, I don’t think the teacher knew exactly what to do with me. My desk was at the very front, right up against the white board so I could read it. Let’s just say I stuck out like a sore thumb… but things were different back then.

Once I was a Permanent Resident, I was able to get the support I needed from BLENNZ which included a teacher-aid as well as a giant CCTV. I took up three desks at the very front of the class. One for me, the other for my CCTV and another one for my
teacher-aid. Everyone could see my work because of the CCTV and it made me quite self-conscious. This was when I really noticed the difference between the other kids and myself.

BLENNZ really helped me in this part of my life. My mum signed me up to every event, camp or outing that BLENNZ held which allowed me to spend time with other kids in the same position as me. It gave me the opportunity to grow and express myself in a judgment-free environment.

Fast forward a bit to Intermediate School and technology had changed. I had a laptop and a camera that was attached to a metal arm which allowed me to view the white board clearly. No one else had this kind of technology, but at least it was more inconspicuous. I also had a teacher-aid that continued to help me.

You know the saying “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me…?” Well, the words did hurt, a lot. This was when the bullying started, I was called everything under the sun because of my condition, some of which I can’t say but I’m sure you can use your imagination.

The thing is, I didn’t know much about my vision impairment, which is why I was so sensitive towards it. The other kids didn’t know anything about it either because I didn’t tell them. Humans tend to be a certain way when it comes to the unknown.

This lead me to do some research on my condition and allowed me to shine a light on the ignorance that plagued the minds of the kids around me.

Starting College, I had a clear understanding of my condition and the needs that followed. But there were still the ups and downs. I was still bullied in the beginning but I learnt to stand on my own two feet, after some time the bullying stopped because I didn’t give them the satisfaction of a reaction. It did still bother me at times, but I learnt to get over it.

At the same time, all the other teenagers where getting their driver’s license, great … Suddenly I was left alone during lunches. I typically went to my sister’s for lunch as she lived nearby. We became much closer during this time, so I guess it wasn’t all bad.

At this point I had an iPad which literally CHANGED MY LIFE. This was when it was “cool” to have an iPad, nowadays every man and his dog has one. I was able to be as independent as possible when it came to school work and I only needed my teacher-aid when it came to exams or higher levels of work.

My teacher-aid was bloody fantastic! She learnt my needs, helped where she could and respected and knew when to take a step back to allow me to “fit in” with my fellow class mates.

She also knew how to get my A into G when I would make excuses or when I used the “Blind Card” with substitute teacher. I’m proud to also say she was my friend and mentor.
Having a teacher-aid did have its disadvantages though. When it came to exam time, all the other kids thought I cheated because I had my teacher-aid with me and did so well.

They are first and foremost a reader/writer so they read and write for me to save time. Never mind the fact that I was somewhat intelligent and paid attention in most subjects.

I was accused of cheating A LOT. There were some teachers that simply wouldn’t adjust their teachings with me, even when I told them how.

Literally, all they needed to do was email the work to me and not study films with bloody subtitles! Here’s me sitting in class, twiddling my thumbs because I can’t speak German. I was a bit naughty and just never attended those classes again. Hey, I never said I was a saint.

Jumping into adulthood, I thought it might be a good idea to study at BLENNZ through the Kick Start programme they used to have in Auckland. This allowed me to develop my daily living and mobility skills and it was a huge benefit to my life and confidence. I even started using a cane. You whip that thing out while waking down Queen Street in Auckland and you’ll feel like Moses parting The Red Sea!

After BLENNZ I had to start thinking about my future. I made Hamilton my base and tried to work up from there. I had no paid employment and I only had volunteer work experience through SPCA and Guide Dogs NZ.

I applied for a few positions but was unsuccessful. I was lucky enough to have such a supporting partner who truly cared and really encouraged me through thick and thin. But I almost started to believe I’d be on the disability benefit for the rest of my life, especially when COVID hit.

Suddenly, there was hope of me being a valued working member of society. My Work Broker from Workbridge shone a light at the end of this dark, unemployed tunnel. And there it was; GPSOS.

I am honoured and grateful to be a part of a company that truly cares and provides opportunities for people like me to make a positive impact in other people’s lives. I even have a personal safety pendant myself which has improved my mobility and makes me feel safer while using public transport and exploring the city I call home.

- Lorna Coker
What is Alexa?

With the recent announcement from Blind + Low Vision NZ, that they have received funding for 3500 Amazon Echo devices, it is apparent that these virtual assistants will become much more than just a means of accessing their talking book library.

For those who are not fussed on trying to learn how to use a computer, these assistive devices are a very simple way to access information online. While you don’t need a computer, you will still need an Internet connection.

So what some people refer to as “Alexa”, is actually an Amazon Echo. Alexa is the virtual assistant inside the Echo, developed by Amazon, much like Siri for Apple, Google assistant for Android, and Cortana for Microsoft. These are all voice activated programs that will, with varying degrees of success, implement a task based on your voice commands. Alexa is the clear leader of the pack.

The Amazon Echo connects to your Internet and allows you to do a number of things that you might normally do with a computer, but instead you simply give Alexa the relevant voice command.

There are also a number of home automation devices you can link to it such as lights, heaters, doorbells, security cameras, cooking appliances and even a kettle! Yes that’s right, with a simple voice command to Alexa you can instruct it to boil the jug.

Alexa is now available on a range of Amazon Echo devices as well as other branded smart speakers.

While the Echo Plus and Echo Studio 3D are higher spec versions the Echo, there is an Echo model for every purpose:

Amazon Echo 3rd Gen; ($156)
Features a high-quality built-in speaker, allowing you to play your favourite music, podcasts, or audiobooks with clarity and very good sound quality. Also, since the Echo features Bluetooth technology, you can connect other Bluetooth devices to it. The Echo is good for those who want an Alexa device that they can use as a Bluetooth speaker as well as a virtual assistant.

Echo Dot 3rd Gen ($79)
The Dot is one of the smaller devices in this lineup, but it’s also much cheaper than the other Echo devices. With the Dot, you can do everything that the second-generation Echo can do. The only drawbacks to the Dot are that their speakers aren’t as good as the second-generation Echo and you won’t be able to make phone calls with it. The Dot is a great option for those who want to test the waters with Alexa without spending a lot of money on a regular Echo device. The Dot is also great if you want to put them in different rooms.

Echo Flex ($39) about the size of a pack of playing cards, is the smallest way to get Alexa in your home, plugging right into the wall. It has a small speaker and microphone, but there’s also a 3.5mm socket to connect to an existing speaker. It’s not really designed for playing music due to the small speaker, but if you want voice control for Alexa features then the Flex is a good option.
The Echo Link ($316) connects to your existing stereo which is quite useful if you have a good stereo system already. You might find through, other options at a better price. The Echo Auto ($79) as its name suggests is for the car.

Echo Show comes in 3 sizes and has a 5, 8 or 10 inch screen. Prices range from $142 (Echo 5); $158 (Echo 8); to $365 for the 2nd Gen 10.1 inch Echo Show which has a built-in hub.

For some users this might be a worthy replacement for an ageing iPad. One “skill” I saw demonstrated was the ability for a blind person to hold an object near the screen and ask what it is. That could be a very useful tool for the blind, if that “skill” works in NZ.

What can it do?
• Home Automation – There are many smart home products that feature Alexa integration and they include: Smart home hubs; Lighting; Switches, dimmers and power outlets; Home security, locks and cameras; Heating and cooling; Automotive and more.
• Shopping/Ordering – Adding items to a shopping list which can be accessed from your phone while shopping. You can also order takeaway and delivery if the appropriate “skill” is available here.
• Music – you can hear music from your media library, or you can link up with streaming apps like Spotify, Apple Music, iHeartradio, Rova, podcasts, TED Talks, Audible and much more.
• Sports – most of your favourite sports will likely have a “skill” for Alexa, so you’ll be able to get the latest results.
• Health – You can use Alexa to set reminders to take medication, or do a workout. With the appropriate skills, you can get information on certain medications, sync with fitness trackers or even just relax and meditate. There are skills to help you manage your diet, and give you healthier recipe options.
• News - most local news services are available through Alexa. You can get news updates whenever you ask.
• Weather - Alexa can tell you what the weather forecast is going to be, but with the NZ MetService skill, you can get more detailed reports.
• Safety - Alexa can send a message to an emergency contact. When you leave your house you can ask Alexa to guard your home and it will listen for smoke alarms as well as glass breaking.
• Miscellaneous – Alexa can pretty much do anything you ask. You can enable skills to tell you jokes, trivia or questions of the day; find you new recipes; play instructional videos; help you learn a new language; you can enable a skill to manage your social media accounts.

You can use Alexa to create routines where one voice command will set off a chain of activity.

What Are Alexa Skills?
Basically, a skill is like an app for your smart phone. You can visit the Alexa Skills section on amazon.com or via the Alexa smartphone app, to find a large range of skills from a wide variety of categories. With over 70,000 skills to choose from, you’ll be able to find something to suit your needs!
Coming to an Apple device near you …

In late June this year, apple announced a raft of new features soon to be on their various devices. While it was a virtual event due to COVID19, the conference allows developers a sneak peek of new features, along with a tool kit to make use of the new features and create new apps or updates before the new software is released, usually in September.

Whats New in iOS 14
Apple’s soon to be released’ version 14 of its iOS is full of new interesting features, too many to list here, but there are a few that are worth a mention.

The most interesting one I found is an app that Apple have developed called translate which will come out as part of iOS 14 in September 2020.

It will allow you to instantly translate into any of the following languages: English; Mandarin Chinese; French; German; Italian; Spanish; Japanese; Korean; Arabic; Portuguese; and Russian. Best of all, the translation takes place on your phone not on the Internet so you can still use it when you’re offline. Because the translation is processed on your iPhone there is also no risk of any privacy breaches you might have if you did it over the Internet.

You simply hold your phone in landscape view and it will enter conversation mode; translating between languages in real-time so you can have a proper conversation.

The Maps app has been upgraded to identify elevation changes; routes that have bike lanes; avoiding routes with high traffic and even letting you know if there are stairs where you may need to carry your bike.

You’ll be able to add widgets to the home screen. They come in different sizes so you can customise exactly how much information you want to see.

App library allows you to manage all your apps so you don’t have lots of pages to your home screen, you just have the most important apps and then all the other stuff goes on a page called Apple library where they are grouped by App Store categories.

iOS 14 will have picture in picture which allows you to access things on your phone while still having a FaceTime call or watching a movie.

Siri’s user interface has been remodelled, so rather than taking up the whole page it uses just a small space at the bottom of the phone so you can still see what’s on your screen while asking Siri a question.

Siri has received a bit of an upgrade as well, so it can now answer a broader range of questions hopefully!

Siri can also send an audio message which will be really useful for those of us who struggle with texting or getting Siri to understand Kiwi accent dictation.

On that note, dictation will now be part of the built in neural engine of iOS so dictation happens offline, which means increased privacy.

Messages, the texting app, has got a major revamp, focusing on group conversations. Important messages can now be pinned to the top of the list.

There’s also a feature called mentions which you can filter group messaging to only be notified of messages that you were mentioned in.
And for a bit of fun there’s Memojis. If you’re not sure what a Memoji is, it’s like a cartoon figure of yourself that you create and add your personality to.

There are now more than 1 trillion options for creating your personalised look and when it speaks it talks in your voice but it’s like a cartoon. It may seem a bit silly, but it’s pleasantly playful.

**MacOS 11.0 - (Big Sur)**

By many accounts, MacOS 11.0 - (Big Sur) will be a welcome improvement on MacOS 10.15 (Catalina). While the changes seem cosmetic, the move to OS11 signifies the next generation of system architecture that will follow.

One exciting new feature is that you will now be able to run iOS apps on the Mac. This will greatly benefit developers, but will also overcome the frustration that many of us have found when we want to use our favourite app, but it is only available on our iPhones.

Control centre is also now included on the Mac and you can drag and drop items into the navigation panel.

Safari has a host of new security features so, if it’s not already your browser of choice, it’s probably worth another look.

In my opinion however, the biggest news is that Apple plan to drop the Intel chips, instead running Apple silicon in all new Macs. When iOS gets some Mac features and MacOS gets some iOS features, it’s not hard to work out where things are heading.

Based on the A12Z processor that’s in the latest iPad, the Mac mini is the first desktop to run the latest Apple silicon.

But before you start thinking the Mac you just bought is now an expensive Intel-based boat anchor, you’ll be pleased to know they’ll be supported for at least the next few years.

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**Do you need help with technology?**

For many of us, we are relying more heavily on technology to keep us in touch with friends and family. For most of us we know just enough to do what we need to, but it often only takes a software update, or an accidental touch on the screen in the wrong place and things can get frustrating very quickly.

Retina NZ now offers basic technical support to help you to become more confident in the digital world.

We can offer FREE tech support for all platforms; Alexa, Android, iOS (for iPhones and iPads), Mac OS and Windows 10. We are not professional instructors, but our support team are proficient with most of the common accessibility apps and software. We have lived experience of using technology while living with vision loss. If you need some (free) help, please contact us and we’ll do our best to find you a solution.

[techsupport@retina.org.nz](mailto:techsupport@retina.org.nz) 0800 569 849 ext 1
GPSOS - Your personal bodyguard

We don’t sell advertising in this newsletter and don’t typically endorse products. But I wanted to tell you about GPSOS; a company that not only makes a couple of really useful products, but also it’s a company that is committed to employing people with disabilities.

It’s often easy to be cynical about their motives, when businesses strategically seek to employ people with disabilities. In this instance, after conversations with their operations manager, it’s apparent to me that their motives are genuine and that the 5 visually impaired employees, plus employees with other disabilities, bring an innate ability, based on their own lived experiences, to empathise with clients and understand the fears and anxieties associated with putting yourself in vulnerable situations.

With their head office in Whanganui, GPSOS Founder & CEO Mark Simmonds was motivated by the unfortunate passing of a friend’s father, who had a stroke and they found him too late.

Mark sourced the latest technology to develop a personal safety device which they call an” Independence Alarm” not a medical alarm, which makes sense when you take a look at how it works.

2-Way Communication;
Monitored 24/7 to ensure you quickly get help. The registration process includes details of close contacts so while you are on the call, they can phone a friend or neighbour to offer immediate help as well as arranging an ambulance if that’s what’s required.

It’s also portable, so you will get the same safety benefits whether you are at home or out and about.

For some, that might mean the extra confidence they need to venture out at night, walk home by themselves, or go into dimly lit or noisy places, where they might otherwise feel vulnerable.

Panic Button;
Simply pressing the big yellow button opens a hands-free communication channel. This need not be a medical emergency; for example if a blind person got lost in the CBD, they could press the button, advise they were lost and ask for directions to the bus station.

In a different scenario, a person working alone who might be subjected to armed robbery, the response team will listen for a few seconds before speaking to ensure they don’t escalate the situation.

GPS Location
The geo-locating technology used in these devices allows you to be located on-demand to within a few metres, but in a hotel or high-rise apartment block, it might be harder to identify which
floor you’re on. Similarly, if you plan on snow skiing through avalanches or hunting in remote mountains, you should always ensure you have an appropriate locator beacon with you and should not rely on this device to replace that specialised technology.

Vital Signs / Monitoring
You can choose to opt in or out of several different monitoring options including:

- The pendant can automatically detect when you’ve had a fall. This is very useful if you lose consciousness in the fall. The response team will contact you to check you are okay and get help if you are unresponsive.

- Inactivity alert can identify if the device has been in the same location for a long period of time. The response team will check you are okay.

- Monitoring vital signs including blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen levels. This might be useful if someone is recovering from an operation, or has a high risk health issue. You will need the watch rather than the pendant for monitoring vital signs, because it gathers data from contact with the wrist.

Another great feature is Geo-fence alarm. Geo-fencing is like an invisible boundary fence, activating an alert if the person leaves their safe zone. This is helpful if a loved one has dementia. You could set it up so an alert was triggered when they strayed from their property, or went outside the retirement village.

Who can use it?
The Independence Alarm can be used by all ages, not just the elderly.

I’ve had one to evaluate, and I realised that while I do not fear walking in the dark or living alone, when a neighbour stopped me in the street the other night (to say hello). I did not realise there was anyone on the same footpath, so it’s easy to realise how something like that could have been different if the person had sinister intentions.

I also know how fortunate my other neighbour was; he was just finishing work when he had a heart attack. Lucky for him it was right outside his bosses window who saw him lying on the ground, called an ambulance and managed to do CPR until help arrived. Had that happened while he was at home alone he would not be here now.

Another example is one of my family members whose son suffers from Epilepsy and had a seizure while walking with his friend. As he fell to the ground she froze panic-stricken. Luckily a passing motorist stopped, saw what was happening and drove to his father’s house to alert him. He is worried for his son who often goes walking alone at night.

I have not checked it out with MSD, but in my opinion, this Independence Alarm should be funded as part of one’s disability allowance.

GPSOS will be doing a demonstration at our AGM in Auckland in September. If you’d like find out more, phone them directly on 0800 115906 or by email to: hello@gpsos.co.nz

To go into the draw to win a GPSOS pendant alarm, simply email us: editor@retina.org.nz or phone 0800569849 and tell us why you’d like to win it. Good luck!
Bring back free taxis!

As of 30th June, the free taxi transport offer by NZTA under the Total Mobility scheme has ended. The 50% subsidy scheme continues, but for many even paying half fare is not affordable and it may have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of people with limited transport options because of their disability.

Karley Parker and Ari Kerssens from Retina Youth are among the many who are sad to see it go. They saw the profound benefits that free taxi transport had for many kiwis with limited mobility - especially within the blind and low vision community. So they decided to do something about it. Here’s a message from them.

Have Your Say …

If you used the free Total Mobility taxi service during May or June, we want to hear your stories for a petition we’re putting together, requesting that free taxis under the Total Mobility scheme, be permanently reinstated for people with limited transport options because of their disability.

How did free taxis during & after lockdown empower or enable you?

We would love to hear the stories and experiences about how fully-funded taxis helped make it easier to live an independent life.

We believe free transport will empower us to make incredible contributions to NZ society and we really want your help to make it happen.

We want to know what a meaningful difference it would make for you if fully-funded taxis were to become permanent. Or at the very least, if we had an update to the concession so that it was more affordable.

We would love to hear from you! Please email us at: freefarestofreedom@gmail.com or phone Ari via 0800 569 849, ext. 6.

We will add your stories to an online petition, which will later be submitted to parliament. You can keep up to date with our progress at our Facebook page, by searching: “Free Fares to Freedom”. Aroha nui!

After Lockdown … Are you ok?

For many of us who live alone, social isolation is all too real. Give us a call - we’d love to hear from you. We’re available 7 days whenever you feel like a chat.

Peer Support Line
0800 233 833
Important PayWave Info

Banks, Visa and Mastercard temporarily increased the limit on contactless card payments to $200 from $80, for as long as necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is to help reduce the need for customers to touch PIN pads of payment terminals when making in-store purchases. While we are now out of lockdown, the $200 limit remains in place.

This increased limit is a logical measure, but it might mean that some vulnerable people might be at risk of misuse of their card if they rely on others to buy their essential supplies.

One way to overcome this is to set up two accounts on your visa-debit card; a savings account which your income goes into, and a cheque account for money to go out of by contactless payments.

Using either phone banking or online funds transfer, you can move a set amount of money from your savings to your cheque account, then safely give the card to your helper to buy your essential items.

You can also use this system if you want to purchase goods online.

You can safely give out your card details, safe in the knowledge that any fraudulent attempts to use the card, will be limited to the small amount of money you have put in your cheque account.

NZ Genetic Hotlines

Ring any of the following free-phone numbers if you want to speak to a genetic counsellor or geneticist about your own diagnosis of RP, macular degeneration or other retinal degenerative disorders.

Auckland Genetic Hotline
0800 476123 or 09 3074949 [ext 25870] [Northern Regional Genetic Service]

Wellington Genetic Hotline
0508 364 436 or 04 385 5310

Christchurch Genetic Hotline
0508 364 436 or 03 379 1898

RETINA NZ INC.
VALUES, VISION and MISSION

Our Values:
Our work is underpinned by our values: Empathy, Respect and Ethical Practice.

Our Vision:
Equitable availability of safe and effective treatments for all people with degenerative retinal disorders.

Our Mission:
To support people in NZ experiencing sight loss, and their families & friends, by providing easy access to the information and support they might need at different stages of their sight loss journey.

DISCLAIMER & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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Our Publications …

The NZ Low Vision Handbook is our 36 page A4 guide to coping with vision loss with all its daily challenges. It is also available in a range of accessible formats. You can get a FREE copy by contacting us on 0800 569849 ext. 1 or admin@retina.org.nz

“Understanding …” series Adapted from RNIB info for relevance in NZ. There are currently 4 booklets; RP, AMD, Cataracts and Retinal Detachment.

Other resources: We have Amsler Grids [A5 Card], business cards and the "Where do you turn" booklet [an overview of Retina NZ], which are useful handouts for eye professionals when talking to clients. Ask about our updated version of the “Good Look Book” - a compilation of stories by people living with sight loss and the unique experiences of their sight loss journey.

Retina Youth - “A Place For Us” is a DL sized colour brochure full of info and stories for young people by young people. It includes links to Facebook and Retina Youth website.
Where do you turn ... when you’re losing your sight?

Our Publications

Peer Support

Support Groups

0800 569 849
(0800 LOW VIZ)

Low Vision Support and Information

Retina NZ Inc.

FIGHTING BLINDNESS