Laptop-friendly magnification

The Bierley ColorMouse-USB-RM

Bill Harvey tries out the latest in the Bierley magnifier catalogue and finds the instrument, once set up, might be worth recommending in several low vision circumstances

The basic Bierley MonoMouse unit is now well known on the UK market. It is a simple camera system within a computer mouse-like housing which may be plugged into the video input socket on any modern screen to offer a magnified view of anything over which the mouse is drawn.

The latest incarnation I tried out recently is a similar unit but designed to plug into the USB input of a computer (Figures 1 and 2). This allows the magnified image of the text or image under the mouse to be presented on screen. The magnification will depend upon the size of screen to which the viewing window is maximised, but on a standard laptop screen a size of around eight times was achieved (Figure 3). The handset includes a small blue button which switches the image from simple black on white to colour and then to reverse white on black (Figure 4). I found the colour image excellent for high resolution images but for newspaper quality images the magnified representation proved too pixellated.

Once the image is onscreen it is quite possible to use the laptop's own software programmes to change image size and quality. It is also possible to use a screen capture technique to capture a freeze frame which may be stored and later manipulated, a little like a scanner. Versatility is restricted only by the computer functions available.

But who would find this useful?

Increasingly, patients in low vision clinics are demanding the versatility that electronic magnifiers offer and the Bierley range have the added advantage of reasonable cost (the USB-RM retails at £369). I suspect that the initial driver and software uploading may bamboozle a few of the less technophile patients and the TV linking MonoMouse might be more to their taste. The unit uses a programme similar to that used by webcams (which, after all, is basically what this instrument is). After uploading the programme, the
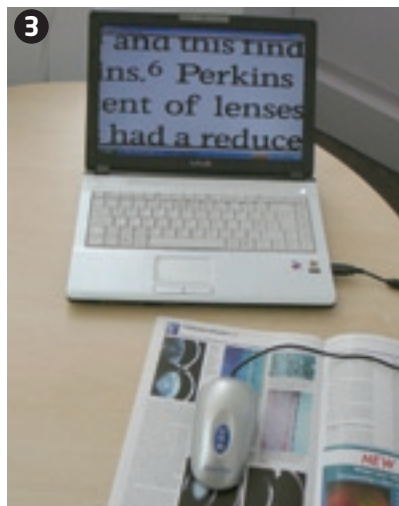
hardware is then inserted and the usual Windows wizard takes you through the driver upload. From that point on, the image may be accessed whenever the mouse is attached by double clicking the icon for the imaging software (AMCAP). My laptop, as with many models from the last two years, has an inbuilt webcam in the lid and it is to this that the software defaults, requiring you to reset it by dropping down the devices menu and clicking on the link to the mouse. This would not be an issue if no other imaging device was already installed.

I occasionally see a school student in the low vision clinic and one of the things that I have learned is how important it is to establish all the areas where they have already received help. Do they have any specialist teaching, are they statemented, do they have electronic aids and so on? Optical magnifiers are only a small part of the armoury and students, usually subsequent to statementing by the school, often receive a laptop to help them with school work. These may well not be fit for the task. I feel that for this situation the MonoMouse USB-RM might prove a useful addition, allowing speedy reading of texts in a classroom setting. Also, at the risk of sounding ageist, most school students would be computer savvy enough to adapt the instrument to meet their particular needs. The statement of special educational needs for the visually impaired student is necessarily a monitored and reviewed statement. This is something that often falls by the wayside and I have found on several occasions that the best management I can give is, rather than offer a heap of magnifiers, to write a letter to the school recommending a review of the statement. I will certainly consider suggesting that laptop magnifiers might be useful on some occasions.

● For further information on this product or for a free 30-day trial contact Bierley on 0800 0430 282.