

Stutterers to benefit from VoiceAmp's speech aid

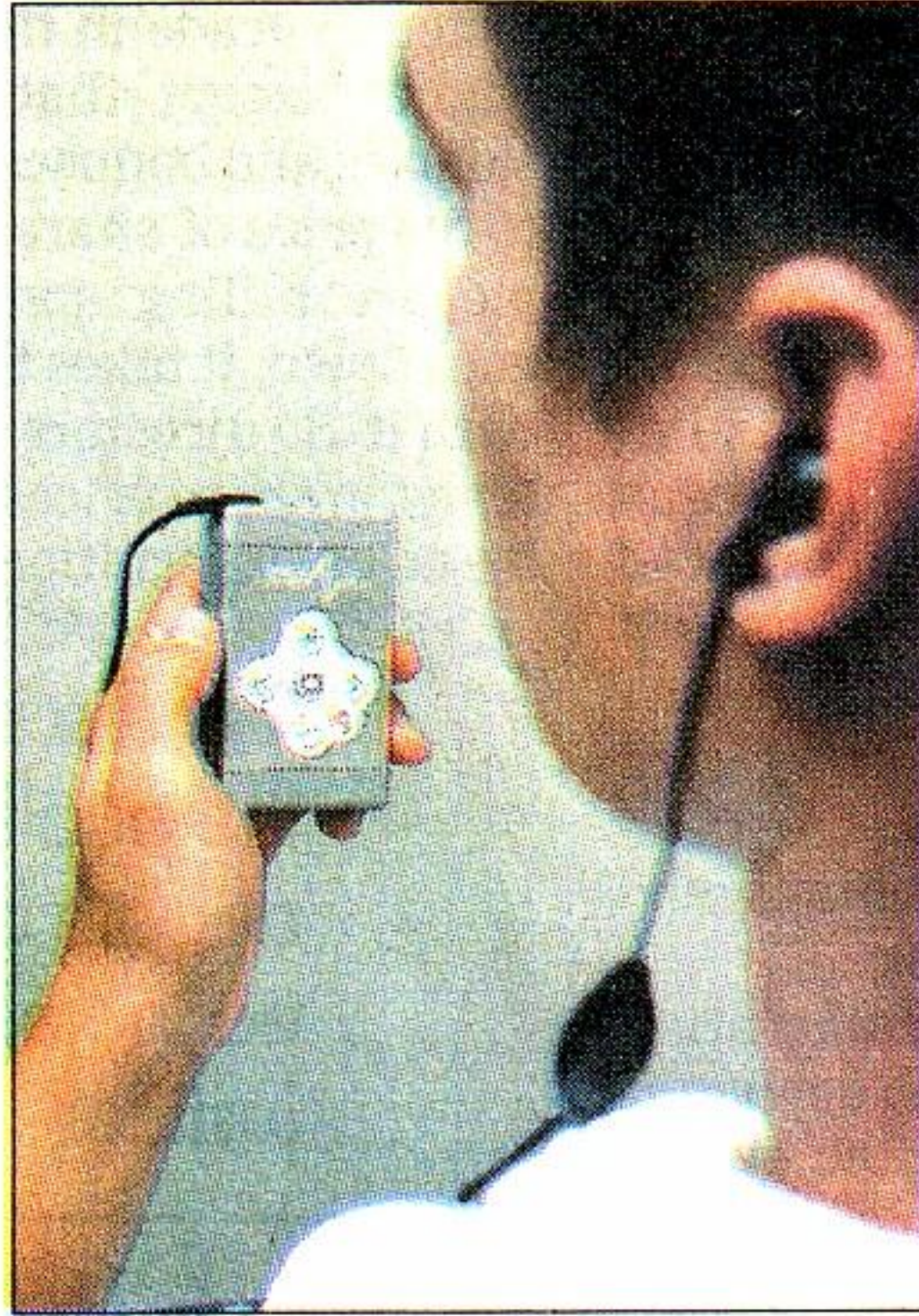
TOM ROBBINS

Cape Town – Electronic speech aid firm VoiceAmp, owned by Cape Town company Korbitec, says it has developed a fluency device for stutterers that it believes has a technological edge over its US rivals in the international market.

VoiceAmp's managing director, Alan Falck, said the technology was unique in that settings for three different background noise levels could be pre-programmed, unlike its competitors, which only had one setting.

Falck said a user could pre-program settings ranging from a noisy background, such as a busy lunch time coffee shop, to a quiet background, such as a private office, and at the flick of a switch move from one to the other.

The VoiceAmp 601 system is based on an electronic reproduction of a phenomenon known as the choral accompaniment,



A VoiceAmp 601 system

meaning that when stutterers talk or sing in unison with fluent speakers, they in turn experience fluency of speech.

The device converts the stutterer's stammering speech to fluent speech and plays it back to them through an ear piece in almost real-time, thus mimicking choral accompaniment.

Falck said the speech was played back only one-tenth of a second after speaking.

The device, which is the size of a credit card, slips into a pocket and sends a signal to a miniature receiver in the ear.

He said because only 1 percent of the population stuttered, the company's main marketing thrust was to take advantage of the massive international marketplace.

Falck said the device retailed for R8 550 or could be rented at R250 a month if a R1 500 deposit was paid.

He said several medical aids would cover the costs of the product and no medical aid had yet turned down requests to subsidise the device.

However, Discovery Health Services said the anti-stutter device was "not a covered benefit".

Discovery Health Services assistant manager Kavin Naidoo said there was "insufficient clinical evidence to support the use of this device".

Falck said the company had successfully completed clinical trials and stressed that the product was not a cure for stuttering but rather "an assistive device" that increased the level of fluency.

He said 60 devices had been sold in South Africa and 64 speech therapists had been trained to set up the device. Falck said orders had been received from Australia and several speech research institutes in the US.

He said the device had cost "a couple of million rand to develop" but would not divulge international sales projections. He did say that he believed the South African market was for only 1 500 devices.