



## Media Alert

Saturday 25 June 2011

### Interview opportunities: Speech Pathology Australia 2011 Conference

Topics to be explored at Speech Pathology Australia's 2011 National Conference this week:

- **Early signs of autism identified**
- **Communication impairment severely impacts on children's education**
- **Stroke-a-chord: Hitting a high note post-stroke**
- **The high cost of poor health communication in the Indigenous community**
- **How APPropriate: New technology gives a voice to people who have difficulty communicating**

#### 1. Early signs of autism identified

Researchers have discovered that toddlers who later go on to be diagnosed with autism use fewer gestures, in findings that may revolutionise the way in which autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is screened.

Early identification and intervention is crucial in managing ASD but until now it has been difficult to diagnose children with the disorder until the age of three or older.

As part of the Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVS) conducted at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, the early developmental skills and behaviour of 1900 children at key ages was measured including those of 45 children diagnosed with ASD between the ages of three and seven years, with the results to be presented at Speech Pathology Australia's 'Diversity & Development NT' National Conference in Darwin this week.

Lead researcher and speech pathologist Carly Veness said that the decreased use of gestures, like pointing, showing, giving, and waving, was the main characteristic that differentiated children with ASD from all other groups of children.

#### 2. Communication impairment severely impacts on children's education

Preschool children who have difficulty communicating are significantly less likely to perform well at school, according to a new study.

They were found to progress more slowly in reading and writing as well as more likely to feel bullied and enjoy school less.

The study investigated the link between children identified with communication impairment at four to five years of age and their educational outcomes when aged seven to nine years, with the results presented at the Speech Pathology Australia national conference this week.

Chief investigator Dr Jane McCormack from Charles Sturt University said the results of the study showed that communication difficulties impacted on children's overall school experience as well as on educational outcomes.

"Overwhelmingly, both parents and teachers reported slower progression in reading, writing and overall school achievement, while the children themselves reported more bullying, poorer peer relationships and less enjoyment of school," she said.

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### **3. Stroke-a-Chord: Hitting a high note post-stroke**

Stroke-a-Chord, a choir composed solely of stroke survivors, has proved that singing improves your quality of life.

Even though members of the group have little or no speech after having a stroke (aphasia) they can still sing, which research has now shown improves their social and emotional wellbeing.

Presenting these results at the Speech Pathology Australia's '*Diversity & DevelopmentNT*' National Conference in Darwin this week, Yooralla speech pathologist Bronwen Jones said that the positive impact on stroke survivors' psychological wellbeing affected almost every area of their lives.

"The mood and self-perception assessments we carried out before the program started measuring choir members' social interaction and communication were very negative – much higher than the general population – meaning they were at far greater risk of depression and social isolation.

"After the 20 week program practising for a performance for family and friends, the same assessments were carried out again and the change was significant.

"Choir members were much more positive and their participation in social communication increased, as did their overall quality of life," Ms Jones said.

### **4. The high cost of poor health communication in the Indigenous community**

Understanding the full health story is difficult enough for most people, but for Indigenous Australians, communication barriers are proving deadly.

At Speech Pathology Australia's national conference this week, Dr Anne Lowell of Charles Darwin University and Indigenous colleagues, Maypilama, Batumbil and Nyomba will explain that effective health communication is fundamental to improving the quality and safety of health care for Indigenous communities.

Limited or a lack of understanding of the cause, nature or consequences of illness, even by Indigenous people relatively fluent in English, contributes to the enormous life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote communities.

Dr Lowell works with the Yolngu in the remote Galiwin.ku community in North-East Arnhem Land and together they are sharing their experiences and findings at Speech Pathology Australia's '*Diversity & DevelopmentNT*' national conference in Darwin this week.

### **5. How APPropriate: New technology gives a voice to people who have difficulty communicating**

Speech pathologists are finding new ways to help people with complex communication needs interact with the world around them.

iPhones and iPads running specifically designed applications mean people with little or no functional speech are able to 'talk' using easily accessible technology.

Presenting a snapshot of these new technologies and their uses at Speech Pathology Australia's '*Diversity & DevelopmentNT*' national conference this week, Jane Farrall believes this is just scratching the surface.

"The possible uses of these types of technology in clinical practice are endless – iPads and iPhones are already widely used to help people with autism communicate. Apple itself recognises this and included children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the launch of the iPad 2.

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“The apps available offer vocabulary and pictures which allow the user to string together symbols to speak sentences or phrases, similar to traditional alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices,” Ms Farrall said.

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**Media contact:**

Joanna Wood on: 0430 633 234 or [marketing@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](mailto:marketing@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

Rachael Nightingale on: (03) 9600 0006 / 0449 881 980 or [rachael@fenton.com.au](mailto:rachael@fenton.com.au)

**About Speech Pathology Australia**

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for more than 4,500 members.

The Association supports and regulates the ethical, clinical and professional standards of its members. The Association also lobbies and advocates for people with communication and swallowing difficulties.

**Speech Pathology Australia’s 2011 Conference**

Local and international industry experts will examine topical issues at this year’s conference.

The Conference theme is *Diversity & DevelopmentNT* and will showcase the innovative contributions of speech pathologists in advancing choices, knowledge and access.

Held at the Darwin Convention Centre, the conference will run from 26-29 June 2011.

