



Media Release

Saturday 25 June 2011

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 & Development*' national conference in Darwin this week.

Dr Lowell and a team of Yolngu researchers have undertaken studies to evaluate education and communication strategies related to health issues and the resources currently available to Indigenous people in remote areas who do not speak English as their first language.

"Health literacy is highly valued amongst the Yolngu and they want to know 'the full story' about their health. The problem is that health information is often provided in English or only available in a format that is inaccessible to them.

"The cultural distance between service providers and Indigenous consumers is often extreme. Limited access to relevant and meaningful information in their own languages seriously affected the ability of Yolngu to make informed decisions about managing their health.

"Health care professionals need to understand the stress and confusion this causes – if you don't understand what is wrong with you, you definitely won't understand the treatment, and this can result in blaming, conflict and confusion for both the individual and their family," Dr Lowell said.

"The serious limitations in communication in Indigenous health care are widely known, but this has not translated into effective and sustained changes in policy, practice or health care provider training. This is particularly important for speech pathologists working with the Indigenous community given the high prevalence of hearing impairment and literacy difficulties. Indigenous people want to understand and take ownership of their health care and government and health care providers need to work together with Indigenous people to make this possible," Dr Lowell said.

For more information on Speech Pathology Australia's national conference, visit www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au.

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The Speech Pathology Association of Australia Limited
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Note to editor

Prior to Dr Lowell and her Indigenous colleagues' keynote address on Wednesday 29 June, Speech Pathology Australia will award highly respected Aboriginal Elder and speech pathologist, Professor Isaac Brown with Speech Pathology Australia Life Member.

In a career spanning over five decades, Prof Brown has made an enormous contribution to advance the position and status of Indigenous people in higher education, as well as holding important state and national roles within Speech Pathology Australia for almost 30 years.

Awarded the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council Indigenous Elder of the Year Award in 2008, Prof Brown worked as a speech pathologist in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory and at one time was the Victorian State Coordinator at the Health Commission, overseeing the need for speech pathology services within the state.

As a Clinical Supervisor for students at the Lincoln Institute (later La Trobe University) in acute general hospitals, rehabilitation centres and aged care centres, Prof Brown helped inspire and shape the careers of many of today's speech pathologists.

Prof Brown was also the Director of the Centre for Aboriginal and Islander studies, later the Dean Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at Charles Darwin University and continues to work as an adjunct Professor with the School of Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Speech Pathology Australia congratulates Prof Brown on a lifetime of achievement and contribution to both speech pathology and higher education and will honour this through Life Membership of the Association he so greatly influenced.

Media contact

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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 & Development* 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.

