



May The King's Speech raise a cry for more school therapists

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Lack of speech therapists for schoolchildren can lead to lifelong misery.

HAVE my fingers crossed that *The King's Speech*, which swept the BAFTAs at the weekend, also claims most of the Oscars later this month, and in doing so catapults the importance of speech therapists to the upper echelons of a society inhabited these days by real estate agents and chief executives.

Access to speech therapy for school-age children is pretty hard to come by in Victoria, we are discovering. My partner and I have a seven-year-old daughter with Down syndrome who is wonderfully articulate, but not in a way that always makes sense. She may look up at the sky and say happily: "It's a sunny day, how disappointing!"

Recently, to our horror, she has started telling people they are fat; even obviously skinny people. Yet when asked what it means to be fat, she has no idea; she has just picked up the word and tosses it around with gleeful abandon, because she loves language, even if she doesn't understand how to use it.

For three years of her life we lived in Northern Ireland and, once a fortnight, she saw an occupational therapist and a speech therapist at our local health centre, for no charge, on the National Health System.

When she developed a stammer, a problem that coincided with the start of kindergarten, her astute speech therapist nipped it in the bud

by way of a series of exercises which we could do at home together. (Thankfully, none were as drastic as some of those dished out to the beleaguered Prince Albert portrayed so vividly in the film, such as being forced to speak with a mouth full of marbles.)

When we moved back to Australia, we imagined that a child with a disability would obviously be entitled to similar services.

Wrong. While speech therapy is readily available to preschool children through community health centres and specialist disability groups, once a child hits school age it's a different story.

The Victorian Education Department provides schools with funding for speech therapists but, according to Gail Mulcair, chief executive of Speech Pathology Australia, it just isn't enough and may mean that the child cannot access timely and adequate speech pathology services.

"We hear many stories about children not receiving the sufficient intervention they need. Often there are long waiting lists because there is high demand for services and, in some areas, a shortage of speech therapists," Mulcair says.

"The other problem in Victoria is that the Education Department sets the funding criteria too high, which means that many children with a severe language disorder do

not receive additional funding to support their needs."

My daughter's school is one that has such a waiting list; we had to go private.

While Medicare provides an Enhanced Primary Care Plan that partially funds up to five sessions a year, this is a far cry from the fortnightly sessions my daughter enjoyed in Ireland from a not-for-profit healthcare body that had her best interests at heart.

Our situation is not unusual. Catherine McAlpine, executive officer of Down Syndrome Victoria, says: "Feedback from our membership indicates many parents end up paying out of their own pocket. Schools tend to put money towards integration aides rather than speech therapy and we are questioning whether that is the best use of funding and whether it encourages independence."

It is concerning that children may be missing out on a range of different therapies as a result. Speech, as so beautifully illustrated in *The King's Speech*, is not just about the mechanics of articulation, it can have psychological components, too. The government's "Better Start" initiative, which begins in July, looks cautiously promising in offering school-age children a

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broader range of therapies that attract a rebate; however, most practitioners currently charge more than twice the rebated amount. It mounts up.

While my daughter's expressive language is colourful and entertaining, it won't help her communicate meaningfully with her classmates or enable her to be fully understood by anyone other than her mother.

Mulcair points out the legacy of children who grow up unable to properly communicate; they can have long-term social and emotional problems, poor academic outcomes and can be at risk of behavioural problems and youth offending.

In Britain, Mark Logue, whose grandfather Lionel Logue was the King's unorthodox speech therapist, played in the film by Geoffrey Rush, is backing a campaign to protect

his legacy from spending cuts that have swept through the country. "The worth of speech and therapies could not be more proven," Logue told *The Observer*. "The net gain to the economy quite apart from unlocking people from lives terribly limited by communication difficulties makes an overwhelming case for the work of my grandfather, who after all saved a king, to be allowed to continue."

Children with communication disabilities may not end up like Prince Albert in a position of great power. But I imagine they all echo his *cri de coeur*, roared out in anger and frustration at the climax of the film when he yells: "I have a right to be heard! I have a voice!"

Kathy Evans is a Melbourne writer.