



Preaching the good word

Ballarat Health Services clinical manager of speech pathology Acushla Thompson talks to Karen Keast about speech pathology as *The King's Speech* basks in Oscars glory.

THE King's Speech won four Oscars at this week's 83rd Academy Awards. Do you think the film has helped generate more awareness about stuttering?

I think it's fabulous because it is actually in a way demystifying stuttering a little bit. It also gives the community some insight into how profoundly it can affect people. Communication is something we all take for granted and it's a really important part of being human. It's how we connect socially, it's how we maintain our relationships, it's how we advance our careers and it's how we express our emotions and feelings. Speech Pathology Australia worked it out that about 210,000 people stutter. It's staggering.

I have already had some contact with some of my clients who had success with therapy but are asking "what can I do now?"

Ringling up and talking to somebody over the phone would be one of the hardest

things for them to do. They get on the phone and they can block and nothing comes out.

HAS the film also resulted in more people considering speech pathology as a career choice?

Anecdotally, Speech Pathology Australia has had increased inquiries. We have a lot of work experience students through and we have a lot of people who want to do a particular profession and switch over to speech once they see it. For people who want to get into a caring profession, they might not have thought about speech pathology. If you have got strong communication skills, it would be ideal.

WHAT do you love about your work?

I think there's so much diversity. I haven't been stuck in a particular role for a long time. I have worked in lots of different programs, with lots of different client groups.

You get to take on other roles that are not

just speech pathology specific. I think because I have been in it for so long I have had the opportunity to work with some really great families and kids and patients during that time. To see the kids down the track when they have their own families and careers and they can have a conversation with you and nobody would know that they have a severe speech disorder that required two to three years of work when they were little. I think it's really rewarding.

WHAT is stuttering?

It's a neurological disorder. It's about the motoring and the timing of the speech and co-ordinating all of that. The cause still remains a bit of a mystery. Research is showing us now that it's mostly due to neural processing or brain activity. There's no indication it's caused by psychological factors.

If you have a stutter you can become quite nervous and stressed so they are intertwined in that way. It does

tend to run in families, there's a genetic link but we don't know what it is yet.

It's more often in men. Research is showing that stuttering in children of 36 months is at 8.5 per cent and that increases to 12 per cent by the time they are four.

A lot of children grow out of it but a lot of children also don't. It's really important we get in and treat them early. If you don't get in and treat them at that early stage it becomes very difficult to get rid of or overcome that stutter.

We use that with our littlies and it's a behavioural approach. We focus on their speech when it's really smooth and positively reinforce that and don't focus on it when it's really bumpy.

Parents are actively involved in the program.

HOW much can stuttering vary from person to person?

For some of them it may be really mild and it might be on key words or key sounds and they have ways of getting around that.

It can be really, really severe in that you can have clients who speak with no air and nothing comes out for almost two minutes. They can end up with facial contortions and ticks.

What we tend to do is develop techniques for them. People who stutter don't stutter when they sing. It's because they are linking their words together and they have a continuous airflow.

They can also change their accent and their stutter is not there.

HOW long have you been a speech pathologist?

Twenty-five years. I have loved it. I have spent my whole time here.

I started off at the Base Hospital and was there for about seven years and came over to the QE, which was the rehab hospital at the time, and worked for a number of years as a rehab speech pathologist. Then we amalgamated. That's when I became the



manager of the speech pathology department

WHAT range of people do speech pathologists treat at BHS?

We have speech pathologists work in the paediatric ward in maternity and the special care nursery. If babies have sucking issues they can quite often develop speech

issues. We see kids who are not quite at school, who have speech delay or disorders or a stuttering problem.

We see people who have sudden difficulties because of cancer or because of surgery for that cancer or radiation, when swallowing becomes a problem.

We see patients in

the acute setting, if they have had a brain injury or a stroke or a head injury. Their cognitive and language skills and thinking skills are impacted.

Our sub-acute or rehab work, that's the long haul work after a stroke or injury. It's very broad.



GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE: BHS clinical manager of speech pathology Acusha Thompson