



Treat early before it's a king-size issue

Wendy Kay

THE movie on everyone's lips as a must-see this summer is undoubtedly *The King's Speech*, an unassuming tale of an English monarch crippled by a debilitating stutter.

Apart from the accolades, which include 12 Oscar nominations, the movie about King George VI (Colin Firth) and his Australian speech pathologist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) has lifted the lid on a disability suffered by more than 300,000 Australians.

Speech Pathology Australia president Chris Stone said the film has highlighted the daily challenges faced by people with a stutter and other communication difficulties.

"It's wonderful to see stuttering portrayed in such a positive way and draw attention to the serious impact this type of disorder has on people's lives," Ms Stone said.

"The stereotype of people who stutter having psychological or mental deficiency is unfair and damaging, so *The King's Speech* will help people understand the true distress and anxiety felt by people who stutter."

Balgowlah speech pathologist

Rebecca Star said that one in seven Australians have some form of communication problem.

At Speech Pathology Service for Adults and Children, Ms Star treats adults and children who have difficulties with speech, using and understanding language, voice, fluency, hearing, or reading and writing.

"These problems can be mild or severe, temporary or permanent, present from birth or acquired later in life," she said.

Previously known as speech therapists and differing from speech and drama teachers, speech pathologists carry out communication assessments, make recommendations and treat communication problems.

"Most people with a communication problem look like anyone else," Ms Star said.

"It may be an adult who stutters severely, or a child who can't say words or sentences the right way."

Ms Star said it's never too early, nor too late to have a communication assessment.

"We don't talk about cures in stuttering, we talk about management," she said. "The problem is

something they have to manage all their lives with good therapy techniques."

Typical speech problems for children include speech sounds, language, understanding what words mean, hearing problems, fluency and swallowing disorders.

"About 5 per cent of children between two and five years of years age stutter, and 50 per cent of those recover naturally," Ms Star said.

"We define a communication disability as anything that attracts attention to itself.

"I get referrals for young children from dentists and childcare centres. If it hasn't been addressed by school, it becomes a problem."

Ms Star described the treatment for speech disorders of children as young as two as "conservative".

"We ask the parents to observe and chart the behaviour, record it when it happens," she said.

"It gives us an idea of the severity of the problem. If we chart it for a few months it may just go away, or it may get more severe.

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"A communication disorder, which continues into the teenage years, can ruin confidence, the child will evade certain situations, become introverted and isolated.

It can develop into serious psychological problems which can affect work opportunities."

Ms Star said chronic conditions such as cerebral palsy or lisping needed long-term treatment, but occasionally there was an instant fix.

"I have a friend who is a speech pathologist who had a voice disorder in that her voice wasn't very strong and she kept losing

it," Ms Star said.

"I went to a lecture on asthma and voice and discovered medication can affect it. She changed her medication and the problem was solved.

"Being able to communicate effectively is something most Australians take for granted, we consider it a basic human right," Ms Star said. "Few of us can ever imagine what it would be like not to communicate effectively."

■ Speech Pathology Service for Adults and Children is at the Balgowlah Counselling Centre, 185 Condamine St. For an appointment, call 0403 970 440.



Alexandra Wright, 8, gets treatment from speech pathologist Rebecca Star at a clinic in Balgowlah.

Picture: BRADEN FASTIER -FP430732



Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush in a scene from *The King's Speech*.



COMMUNICATION PROBLEM SIGNS

- Tripping or stumbling over words
- Occasionally losing one's voice
- Finding it difficult to follow a conversation in a group or at a party
- Not quite understanding jokes
- Being reluctant to speak to new people
- Acting aggressively because of frustration
- Repeatedly needing directions on how to do something
- Difficulty understanding written material
- Underperforming at school or work