



# Cuts loom for speech therapy

*The King's Speech* has highlighted an 'invisible' health issue, writes **Helen Kempton**

**A** GROUP of professionals who speak for those who cannot speak for themselves fears looming public sector cuts in Tasmania will impact on vital early-childhood speech therapy services.

In Australia, 326,000 people stutter and a quarter of all pre-school children have difficulty speaking or making speech sounds.

Speech Pathology Australia, which lobbied during the 2010 federal election for mandated universal access to speech pathology services for children with speech and language disorders, says fewer than half of those with difficulties receive the specialist treatment they need.

Speech Pathology Australia national president Chris Stone said the only public speech therapy available to school-aged children in Tasmania was via the school system.

Ms Stone says she now feared availability of this already scarce resource would be further restricted.

"It is critical that communication problems are caught early," Ms Stone said. "We know from families that so many children are simply not getting the services they need.

"If that early intervention is not provided or is inadequate, children are at risk of significantly poorer vocational outcomes and social opportunities and a higher incidence of emotional problems.

"Young people with communication problems are also significantly over-represented in the youth justice system."

Speech Pathology Australia says long waiting lists for speech pathology services within public facilities caused treatment delays that can have serious, long-term consequences.

Children who enter school with language difficulties are at risk of developing literacy problems, poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, and social and behavioral problems.

They are much more likely to be bullied and socially excluded.

Later in life people with communication problems are more likely to rely on welfare because their employment prospects are limited.

The speech association also lobbied during the last federal election for the Productivity Commission to conduct a national inquiry into the social and economic impacts of communication and swallowing disorders.

This has not yet happened.

Talk of massive cutbacks in Tasmania's public sector have sparked fears that the vital work of speech pathologists through the school system will be undermined.

Kingston mother Lisa Wright said early intervention



had helped her young son overcome his communication difficulties before they impacted on his future.

Darcy Wright, 5, who attends Kingston Primary School, had problems pronouncing some words and undertook work with a speech pathologist after school over two terms.

"Before the therapy only his family could understand what Darcy was saying," Mrs Wright said.

Darcy is the twin brother of James, who does not have any speech difficulties.

"Because he is a twin I noticed he was not speaking properly and was not developing in terms of language like his brother," she said.

"We worked on his problems early and he has come up well. Therapists play a very important role and early intervention is vital to stop communication problems affecting a child's entire life."

Speech Pathology Australia is hoping that the Oscar-winning movie *The King's Speech* will help bring communication problems out of the "closet" and stop speech disorders and other language problems being largely "invisible" conditions.

Ms Stone said funding for children with disabilities often overlooked the less recognised or visible disabilities such as severe language disorders and childhood apraxia of speech.

"The social and economic impact of such disorders in both children and adults could cost the Australian economy anywhere between \$13 and \$15 billion each year," Ms Stone said. "It goes virtually unnoticed because this group of people are unable to speak up for themselves."

She said speech and language disorders may not be part of a recognised complex disability but could have the

same impact, resulting in poor educational outcomes.

Speech Pathology Australia says changes can be made to address the long-term impacts of untreated childhood communication difficulties.

The organisation wants national standards for access to speech pathology services and classroom support for those with problems and an adequate number of speech pathologists directly linked to every school in the country.

It also wants speech pathologists to provide input to early childhood educators and teacher-training curriculums and for access to private speech pathology to be strengthened through extending Medicare rebates and funding packages for children with Specific Language Impairment.



**EARLY INTERVENTION:** Lisa Wright, of Blackmans Bay, with five-year-old Darcy, left, twin brother James and six-year-old Bella. Darcy overcame speech troubles with the help of a speech pathologist. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE



**EXPOSURE:** *The King's Speech* film.