



# Talk about successful treatment

When she developed a keen interest in helping people with stutters overcome their debilitating affliction, speech pathologist Janet Beilby had no idea how personal the journey would become. **Connie Clarke** reports.

**Janet Beilby**  
Speech pathologist  
Lecturer Curtin University

**N**ominated for an Academy Award, *The King's Speech* tells the story of how West Australian speech pathologist Lionel Logue helped King George VI overcome his speech impediment in the 1930s.

The best-film contender is very close to the heart and mind of Janet Beilby, who in a career spanning 35 years has helped more than 7000 children and two to three thousand adults speak clearly and freely.

"The King's Speech has really got people talking and it's long overdue," Ms Beilby said. "It's really worked in helping to break down a lot of misconceptions and ignorance, because even the King of England could be affected by stuttering.

"People who stutter are

completely well-adjusted and normal, they just have this overloading that happens in their muscles that affect the speech pattern."

Ms Beilby moved into the area of speech pathology when the discipline was so new, there was no tertiary course of study in WA. After studying at Melbourne University, she moved back to Perth as a qualified speech pathologist in 1978, the same year she met her husband, renowned WA artist Marcus Beilby.

"When Marc brought me home to meet the in-laws, I shook hands with his father and he presented with a very severe stutter," she said. "He suffered terribly with his stutter — he saw four years of frontline action in World War II and he was never promoted above the rank of private because of his stutter.

"Marcus and I married and we went on to have three bonny children, and guess what — all

three of them stuttered. I really thought all of my sins had come back to visit me when I managed to be a mother of three children who stuttered. I cried myself to sleep of course, but it made me a much better clinician being in a mother's shoes. Fortunately I knew what to do."

Now into adulthood the Beilby children show no signs of their early stutters, with Alexander, 24, finishing a degree in environmental science at the University of WA, Patrick, 23, becoming a lawyer and daughter Eleanor, 18, doing a double major in contemporary performance and fashion at Edith Cowan University.

"I managed to treat them when they were two to three years old and I was very committed," Ms Beilby said. "Patrick had a more severe lock-style stutter and he took longer, close to a year.

"Eleanor's stutter was ironed



out quite quickly because by then I was more determined and committed than ever.

“My father-in-law was very upset when both of his grandsons developed their stutters and he took himself off for therapy in his early 70s and brought his stutter under control. I was so proud of him.

“When it came to my children, I really had to put my money where my mouth was and when it comes to their future partners, I don’t care what their vocations are as long as they can talk.”

While *The King’s Speech* depicts a time when stuttering was considered to be rooted in the sufferer’s psychology, Ms Beilby said much more was understood about speech impediments, with sufferers now widely recognised as having a genetic predisposition to the condition, which is also physiological.

“It’s an overloading of the child’s speech muscle development system,” Ms Beilby said. “That overload produces a tendency to trip and stumble over words. Early signs of stuttering are often seen as children start their sentences, that is where the stutter manifests the most.

“If it’s not nipped in the bud when the child’s young and their muscles are very flexible, it does tend to have a habit factor.”

Early in her career in the 1970s, Ms Beilby remembers when adults with speech impediments became hospital inpatients, spending 10 hours a day in therapy.

“They took sick leave from their jobs and these poor individuals had to earn tokens to call their relatives or to get their meals,” she said. “It was incredibly rigorous, but it needs to be viewed in the context of the behavioural therapies at the time. We genuinely thought the way to treat someone with a stutter was to remove them from their environment, immerse them in this intensive non-stop therapy, and then send them back into the real world at the end of the week.”

While the treatment worked, the nature of the therapy was punitive and patients were reporting they could be fluent only when they saw green carpet similar to that in the clinic room.

“We conditioned them intensively to a set of cues that weren’t going to sustain them in the real world,” Ms Beilby said.

Realising the problem needed earlier intervention, she moved into treating children with stutters.

“Stuttering impacts every aspect of a person’s life — their ability to make phone calls, to conduct job interviews, to go for promotions, develop personal

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relationships, to engage in normal social repartee, the job they choose. I thought, this is too serious and too widespread and we should be doing a better job with children so it doesn’t get to this point.”

Among the high points of her 35-year career was attending the wedding in 2008 of a young patient she first met as a teenager.

“It was my greatest joy,” she said. “He had worked so hard on his wedding speech and he wanted to honour his parents who had come to this country as migrants and worked extremely hard for him. I was so nervous, I was tearing at the tablecloth, but he carried it off beautifully.”



## Seek professional advice early

### **If you suspect your child has a stutter:**

In most cases it was part of a child's physiological make-up, just as was their hair colour, WA speech therapist Janet Beilby said.

"Nobody is to blame, it is no one's fault," she said.

"A large proportion of children affected are born with this predisposition for their speech muscles to overload and to trip and stumble more easily than others.

"It is like when some children are learning to walk, they will trip and stumble and knock themselves whereas others stand up and never put a foot wrong."

She advises parents not to feel alarmed or guilty but to follow their instincts, especially as the problem could surface episodically, and seek early professional advice.

"I can count on one hand the number of times we have had a false positive — by the time parents come to us they have closely watched their child, talked to people about it and researched — chances are the parent is absolutely right in wondering if their child is developing a stutter."



Success story: Janet Beilby with patients Lucy, 6, Genevieve, 9, Ben, 4 and Emma, 10, Frank.

Picture by Rob Duncan