

Speech Pathologists working with Older People



Please read the Important Notice on the reverse of this Fact Sheet.

In our society the number of persons aged over 65 is rapidly increasing and it is estimated that by the year 2011 more than one million Australians will be 75 years or older. Along with this growth, the proportion suffering a communication or swallowing problem is also expected to increase.

Speech pathologists are involved in the assessment and management of communication and swallowing problems. They are uniquely qualified to respond to the total communication needs of older people, to assist individuals and families to manage and overcome these difficulties and to promote independence, participation and self fulfilment.

Communication problems

Difficulties involving communication are common amongst older people. Their ability to speak clearly, understand others or express their wants and needs may be reduced, as a result of diseases such as stroke, dementia or Parkinson's Disease. Along with this, many older people may suffer multiple medical problems.

Speech pathologists work with older people, their families and carers to identify and treat communication difficulties. They strive to optimise a person's communication ability and advocate for those with difficulties. They are involved in promoting effective communication as a fundamental requirement for maintaining an older person's quality of life.

Swallowing problems

Swallowing disorders refer to the loss of ability or desire to feed oneself. Difficulty in swallowing is common amongst older people. Ageing or disease can result in difficulty organising and coordinating the muscles for swallowing. It is estimated that between 16-22% of people aged over 50 years will have problems eating and drinking. A swallowing disorder can compromise a person's health and well being and result in coughing, choking, chest infection, dehydration and malnutrition.

Speech pathologists provide careful assessment and diagnosis of swallowing problems. They advise on swallowing techniques, exercises and may offer dietary alternatives to reduce the risks of ill health and to promote safety and comfort in swallowing.

Stroke

Stroke affects approximately 40 000 Australians every year and two thirds of these people are aged over 65 years. Stroke can result from a sudden disruption in the flow of blood to the brain. When blood cannot reach parts of the brain, vital supplies of oxygen are cut off from the brain cells that control everything we do, such as talking, walking, swallowing and breathing. Consequently, a stroke can result in brain damage and significant disability.

Speech pathologists help individuals regain their ability to communicate and swallow effectively after a stroke. Speech and swallowing therapy can enable stroke sufferers to improve their outcome thus reducing the likelihood of further ill health and nutritional decline.



Dementia

Dementia is more than simply "forgetfulness". It is a term used to describe widespread deterioration in mental functions. It may result in difficulties in reasoning, judgement and emotional control as well as memory loss. The person with dementia may find it difficult to formulate a sentence, understand what is said to them, or even remember how to swallow.

Speech pathologists work with the carers of persons with dementia to help promote effective communication. They can advise regarding simplifications to the person's environment to help maintain successful relationships and facilitate independence.

General health decline

Advancing age can bring with it illness, weakness and confusion. Age related hearing impairment and multiple medical problems may result in older people having difficulty eating, drinking and communicating. Speech pathologists work to support and promote effective communication. They provide advice on safe eating practices, dietary modifications and techniques to improve swallowing.

The emotional cost of communication and swallowing difficulties

Older people with communication and swallowing difficulties often feel disempowered. They can become frustrated and isolated by their inability to communicate effectively with others. Communication and swallowing difficulties may limit their interaction with loved ones and the wider community. Through appropriate treatment and involvement in community programs speech pathologists strive to help relieve these burdens.

Where do speech pathologists work with older people?

Speech pathologists work in a variety of health care settings. These include:

- Acute hospitals
- Community hospitals
- Health care centres
- Nursing homes
- Private homes
- Private practice
- Rehabilitation centres

For further information:

Contact Speech Pathology Australia - the official body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have communication and swallowing disabilities.

References

Please contact Speech Pathology Australia's National Office for the references used to create this Fact Sheet.

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