

LETTER TO A JOURNALIST – The Examiner, Launceston 25/03/09

Re Northern Tasmanian speech pathologist shortage crisis

Dear Michael Lowe,

Thank you for contacting Speech Pathology Australia, the national peak body representing more than 4500 speech pathologists. Speech pathologists are specialists in the area of communication and swallowing disorders that can present at any stage of the lifespan.

Tasmanian parents are frustrated and concerned that their children are missing out on vital speech pathology services due to staff shortages causing long waiting lists. Because speech problems are not classed as life-threatening, they can often be placed at the bottom of the barrel. Restructuring of departments is a common issue, needing to be dealt with on an individual workplace basis, however it needs to be ensured that speech pathologists are not the first professionals to be cut by Government. Unlike in other Australian states, there are virtually no private practice services in northern Tasmania, so parents are at the mercy of hospital and community health waiting lists.

Long term implications of speech and language difficulties may include problems with literacy, poor academic outcomes, mental health issues and behavioural problems, poor self-esteem, and a struggle to manage social relationships. For these reasons, timely early identification and early intervention is essential to reduce the impact of communication difficulties in early childhood.

Speech pathology services across Australian are inadequate and inconsistent for the appropriate remediation of speech and language disorders in young children, but we are particularly concerned at the limited and fragmented services for children's therapy in the northern region of Tasmania. Poorly coordinated services and difficulty recruiting speech pathologists to northern Tasmania would seem to be exacerbating an already critically stretched speech pathology workforce in the North.

A recent research study has shown an alarmingly high prevalence of prep-aged children with speech and language impairments in northern Tasmania (41.2%), in comparison to similar research conducted elsewhere. (Jessup et al, Prevalence of speech and/or language impairment in preparatory students in northern Tasmania, *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 10:5 Oct 2008)

Speech Pathology Australia is very concerned and disappointed about the available staffing levels for children's speech pathology services at Launceston General Hospital, St Giles Therapy Services, and the Child Development Unit. Inadequate staffing levels and cutbacks in some areas have exacerbated the already very long waiting lists.

Despite the government's *Children's Therapy Services Improvement Project (CTIP)*, aimed at improving access to speech therapy for Tasmanian children, there have been *no* significant improvements, and in fact across a number of services, the available speech pathology positions have decreased. We remain concerned that the CTIP project carries with it a mandate to be cost/resource-neutral, as we believe that while certainly improvements in communication to families and referral pathways will be made, the shortfall in available speech pathology services will remain unaddressed.

Speech Pathology Australia would welcome the opportunity to work with government to develop an appropriate policy and service model to address this crucial issue of service provision. Appropriate planning and funding can assist to overcome these shortages.

Speech pathologists play a crucial role in the enhancement of the communication, social, emotional, speech and language development skills and quality of life of children with communication delays/disorders.

The Association advocates that equal access to speech pathology services is the right of all Australian children.

Thank you for helping to highlight the speech pathology profession and all those in the community with speech and language difficulties. Parents who would like more information can visit:
www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

Please don't hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Gail Mulcair
Chief Executive Officer