



Smooth speech within reach for stutterers

New techniques are allowing more people to access treatment for stuttering. **Anna McAlister** reports

02sep06

SARI doesn't know this, but her name was chosen out of necessity. "I could say S at the time," says her mother, Jane. "It was an easy name, I could say it and I liked it."

For decades, Jane was so anxious about her severe stuttering that whenever the phone rang her hands would shake and she'd break into a sweat. Telephone dread is one of many difficulties faced by those who stutter, because uncontrollable disfluency makes them exhausted and anxious.

Stuttering is also unpredictable. It fluctuates with tiredness, stress or for no apparent reason, and while some people stutter randomly, others have trouble with particular sounds. This limits a person's vocabulary and, in turn, the concepts they can express.

"You know you're going to stutter on a certain word, so you use other inappropriate words, and people look at you strangely," says Jane. "It's a real struggle all the time."

Public hospitals used to offer treatment for adult stuttering, but in the past decade most of their programs have closed – due to government funding changes as well as an emphasis on treating stuttering in early childhood.

The trouble is that stuttering therapies did not appear until the 1970s, so there are many adults who weren't treated when they were children. Those adults are still missing out, but new research may help address this.

Speech pathologists at the University of Sydney's Australian Stuttering Research Centre are developing cognitive behaviour therapy for stuttering-related anxiety. They're also trialling a telehealth program that would allow patients to access treatment via telephone.

Everyone has heard the repeating that characterises stuttering, as in "t-t-t-tiger", and the prolonging, as in "mmmm-mother". But stuttering can also include blocking, where the speaker becomes "stuck" on a sound and, for a few seconds, can't speak at all. Blocking can involve involuntary facial contortions and tends to be the most frustrating and stressful disfluency for those who stutter.

While there's no cure for adult stuttering, patients can learn to speak fluently using speech restructuring techniques. Australia's most common technique, "smooth speech", has traditionally been taught in an intensive course, full-time for a week with follow-up sessions. Smooth speech patients learn to prevent stuttering by pronouncing their consonants softly and their vowels breathily. They also practise inhaling then speaking on the outward breath. They talk slowly while they concentrate on employing these techniques, starting at a crawling 40 syllables per minute and gradually speeding up.

The final step is applying smooth speech to normal communication, particularly in situations stressful for people who stutter. Patients are supervised giving talks and holding conversations. They may also have to make phone calls and request items in shops, with a therapist or fellow patient observing them.

Smooth speech is a well-respected technique, but governments have been reluctant to fund the intensive courses, which are also often not particularly convenient for patients. They require clinicians to work outside their normal hours and interrupt patients' work and family lives. However, the Australian Stuttering Research Centre's director, professor Mark Onslow, says ASRC's new research aims to increase the efficiency and accessibility of stuttering treatment for adults.

Besides saving patients' and clinicians' time, the centre's telehealth treatment – delivered down the telephone line – could be accessed anywhere in Australia, making stuttering therapy available for the first time in rural areas. And because it involves minimal contact with therapists, patients can do

it whenever they like.

The treatment is based on a version of smooth speech. Each patient learns fluency techniques in a phone call with a therapist and receives exercises to work on.

"It's low-tech," says Onslow. "The patient rings up and records their speech practice and the therapist listens to it later and checks that it's okay." The therapist sends a confirmation message if the patient is doing well, or calls them if they need help.

The telehealth program does not incorporate slow speaking or supervised day-to-day communication, but Onslow says research has shown that these steps are unnecessary. He estimates that telehealth would take patients only 20 hours to complete instead of the minimum 100 for traditional smooth speech.

The ASRC has also developed a treatment for stuttering-related anxiety.

"We suspect you get anxious because you stutter," says Onslow. "Then when you're anxious, you stutter more because anxiety disturbs the speech motor system."

Studies have shown that up to 50 per cent of people who stutter suffer from social anxiety and the purpose of the therapy is to reduce fear of negative evaluation in social situations. Many people feel overwhelmed just trying to order a meal, approach a sales assistant or ask a question in class, let alone give a speech.

Margie Morrison has a relatively mild stutter but it's been enough to affect her self-esteem at times. "When you can't even say your own name, that can really toy with your sense of self-worth," she says.

The fear of other people's negative reactions to stuttering is sometimes well-founded. Morrison shudders telling the story of a man who tried to order a drink, but stuttered so much that the bartender thought he was intoxicated and refused to serve him. Increasingly flustered, the man couldn't explain that he was stuttering, he was sober, or that he just wanted a beer. Finally, the police were called.

The ASRC is trialling a cognitive behaviour therapy which helps patients identify the irrational thoughts that lead to their anxiety, then decrease their sensitivity to anxiety-provoking situations, such as phone calls, by doing them repeatedly.

Patients are also encouraged to compare their expectation of a bad experience, such as stuttering while speaking to a stranger, with the way it feels in reality. Finally, rhythmic breathing and relaxation exercises are used. Onslow says plans are also under way to develop a telehealth version of this treatment.

Vitaly, the ASRC's research means that over the next five years, adults and teenagers who stutter can access therapy by participating in clinical trials. The centre is conducting trials in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Newcastle and Albury.

Doctor Susan Block is part of the ASRC research team. She says maintaining fluency is similar to managing a weight problem, in that speech restructuring demands lifelong practice. In the 1970s the Australian Speak Easy Association was established. Speak Easy is a voluntary, Australia-wide network of support groups where people who stutter meet to work on their smooth speech techniques.

"What's frustrating for people who stutter is that after they've had treatment, they'd like to be able to just open their mouths and talk, but treatment doesn't give them that luxury," says Block. "That's where Speak Easy is fantastic, because with good leadership it helps people maintain their skills. And it gives them the confidence to keep focused."

The problem is that because adults can't access publicly funded stuttering treatment, Speak Easy numbers are dwindling. And without Speak Easy, people who have learned techniques such as smooth speech would have significant trouble maintaining their fluency.

Onslow says Speak Easy would still be an important resource for patients of ASRC's new treatments, and could expand usefully into an advocate for all who stutter.

There's no doubt the ASRC developments could be a godsend for people whose stuttering is debilitating.

When she returned to the workforce in the early 1980s, Jane enrolled in a smooth speech course through Canberra Community Speech Therapy, and joined Speak Easy.

"It's made my life much easier, although I'm not fluent all the time," she says. "Sometimes I'm speaking to someone and concentrating so much on what I'm trying to say that I'll forget about smooth speech. Then I'll come a cropper."

To access stuttering treatment through trials in your city, contact the Australian Stuttering Research Centre on 02 9351 9061 or visit <http://www.fhs.usyd.edu.au/asrc>.

To join Speak Easy, visit <http://www.speakeasy.org.au>

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