



Abstract

The Importance of Speech-Language Pathologists & Audiologists to Children and Adults with Disability

DR HSS AMAR-SINGH

MSc Community Paediatrics (Ldn), FRCP (Glasg)

Consultant Community Paediatrician and Head of Paediatric Department, Hospital Ipoh

Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists are vital professionals in the management of children with many types of disability. Community surveys of disability have shown that up to ten percent of individuals in a community have a disability. Approximately 6-8% of all children under 12 years have a speech, language or communication problem. These include children with hearing impairment (either congenital or acquired), Autism or ADHD (hyperactivity), intellectual handicap (e.g. Downs' syndrome, Mental Retardation), specific learning disorders (e.g. Dyslexia), etc.

Speech and Language Therapists/Pathologists (SLPs) are qualified health professionals who work with children and adults who have difficulties with communication, eating and swallowing. They provide assessment and therapy aimed at improving communication. The children and adults they work with are outlined in Figure I.

Audiologists are qualified professional who do hearing assessments for children and adults with hearing loss or balance problems. They perform hearing tests, refer patients for medical treatment and provide hearing rehabilitation services (dispense and fit hearing aids). The majority of the problems listed in figure I would require an assessment by an Audiologist. They are also involved in newborn and infant hearing screening.

Figure I: Clients of Speech and Language Therapists/Pathologists

Children with:

- Feeding & swallowing difficulties
- Hearing impairment
- Cleft palate
- Autism/ADHD
- Learning disorders - Language delay, Dyslexia
- Intellectual handicap
- Cerebral palsy
- Stammering
- Voice disorders

Adults with:

- Post stroke problems (eating, swallowing, communication difficulty)
- Post head injury, Parkinson's disease
- Post surgery for cancer (neck! throat)
- Voice problems
- Stammering
- Hearing impairment

Both Speech & Language Therapists/Pathologists (SLPs) and Audiologists work closely with parents and other professionals like paediatricians, nurses, occupational therapists, etc. Paediatricians serve as the primary referral of children to both professionals.

It is important to stress that, to adequately assist children with disability, it is very important to refer them early for assessment by an Audiologist and for assessment & therapy by a Speech & Language Therapists/Pathologist. Parents often fail to understand the hard work required to enable children with disability to communicate effectively. There is no "magic" solution. Regular and frequent therapy by a SLP with the parent's involvement is the key.

Currently there is a severe shortage of both Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists in Malaysia. The majority of children and adults who require these services are not able to obtain them. There is a need to promote both professions to young people in school, as well as to develop more training avenues for them. However training more of these professionals alone is inadequate. We need to ensure that they have the required quality and professional capability ("hands on skills") to benefit their clients.