

5 December 2012

Changing post-stroke speech therapy

Investment in intense therapy for post stroke patients with aphasia improves quality of life for survivors, as well as producing significant savings to the hospital system.

This is according to new Griffith University research which was presented at the Gold Coast Health and Medical Research Conference 2012 last week.

Aphasia, common in the elderly, is the inability to communicate and/or comprehend language, contributing to a dramatic, and perhaps unnecessary, decline in the quality of life in nearly 30% of Australia's 60,000 annual stroke survivors.

Unlike dementia, people with aphasia are otherwise lucid and can often become depressed by their condition, with physical health declining with their mental health.

A recent study of more than 66,000 inpatients revealed after adjusting for age, gender, and other comorbidities, aphasia was the disorder which most negatively impacted on quality of life in comparison to other health conditions, including cancer and dementia.

Associate Professor Elizabeth Cardell, from the Griffith Head of Speech Pathology, called for change in acute post stroke therapy in Queensland hospitals following research which found intense therapy yielded considerably improved outcomes for patients with aphasia.

"Some people with aphasia have described the condition as living with a crackly telephone line in their head, 'I know what I want to say, I can see the word, I can hear the word, I just can't get it out!' It's enormously frustrating and debilitating for them," Dr Cardell explained.

According to Dr Cardell, the research showed a significant improvement in communication ability and quality of life when intensive therapy was undertaken early.

"Intensive therapy actually appears to change the brain, a kind of rewiring occurs which allows the improvements to translate more deeply into everyday life in a way casual therapy does not," she added.

Dr Cardell's team carried out research at Gold Coast, Ipswich and Queen Elizabeth II Hospitals using three different kinds of therapy support.

"Beyond being able to see improvements in speech outcomes, we've had reports from patients, family and carers of really significant changes in the quality of life outcomes of people following the intensive speech therapy."