

Learning to speak “aphasia”-
*Speech Pathologists and interpreters
working together in the health care setting.*
Robyn Alexander

Speech Pathologists work with people whose communication is impaired, while interpreters bridge the gap created by a language barrier. Communication is central to the roles of both professions. Frequently, Speech Pathologists rely on interpreters to assist with equitable, effective and culturally sensitive assessment and management for their patients. In order for the Patient-Interpreter-Speech Pathologist triad to be effective, each discipline must bring an understanding of their roles and responsibilities to ensure that optimum patient outcomes are met.

As identified by demographic and epidemiological data, the cultural diversity of patients entering the health care system in Australia is on the increase. Current trends show that a higher percentage of elderly patients from non-English speaking backgrounds are entering the health care system suffering from stroke or stroke related risk factors. Speech Pathologists work closely with stroke patients due to the high prevalence of communication disorders in this population.

Stroke can cause “aphasia”, a difficulty in understanding or producing language. Aphasia can be likened to a language barrier - often the patient cannot understand or express themselves to have their wants and needs met and thoughts known. Aphasia can also make it difficult for the patient to understand medical conditions, follow recommendations and give informed consent.

When a language barrier is coupled with aphasia, the result can be isolation and depression. In this instance, the role of the interpreter is paramount in alleviating the patient and family’s anxiety, helping the Speech Pathologist identify areas of communication breakdown and supporting the patient to move towards realising realistic and achievable goals.

This presentation aims to discuss communication disorders seen in patients with stroke, identify the Speech Pathologist’s objectives in assessing and managing patients with aphasia and highlight the important role interpreters’ play. The presentation will also outline the “rules” to aphasia assessment and provide strategies to facilitate communication in the language of “aphasia”.

Biographical Details:



Robyn Alexander is a Speech Pathologist working in the Neurosciences Division at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, Western Australia. Robyn has had clinical experience working with interpreters and translators in her adult and paediatric positions in Sydney, New Zealand and rural and metropolitan WA. She has recently contributed to the WA Health Language Service Network policy. Robyn has a special interest in managing the communication and swallowing needs of patients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.