Speech Pathology Australia

Speech Pathology Australia (SPA) is the national professional organisation for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 6000 members. Speech pathologists are the allied health professionals who specialise in treating speech, language, communication and swallowing problems. We provide services in the acute care, sub-acute care and primary care sector as well as within other sectors such as disability, aged care, education, mental health, and the juvenile and criminal justice systems and settings. Speech Pathologists work in both the public and private sector and in urban, regional rural and remote locations.

Speech Pathology Australia is governed by a Board of Directors at the national level with branch committees operating at state and territory levels. In addition, there are a range of special interest groups (member communities) supported by the Association in relation to specific areas of practice or clinical interests. The SPA – Rural and Remote Member Community is a sub-group of the Association and has 268 members. The network is formed from members with an interest in advancing speech pathology services in rural and remote parts of Australia. The group communicates via a Facebook Closed Group where members may post information, questions or comments for others to respond to. The SPA-RRMC is supported by staff at National Office, particularly Christine Lyons (Senior Advisor, Professional Practice) and Ronelle Hutchinson (Manager, Policy and Advocacy).

Speech Pathology Australia is represented on a range of national networks and alliances (such as National Aged Care Alliance and Allied Health Association of Australia). Speech Pathology Australia joined the National Rural Health Alliance as a Member Body in 2014.

In terms of key strategic work of the Association throughout 2013 and 2014, key focuses include advocating for registration, a federal senate inquiry, involvement in an international collaborative project and NDIS.

Self - Regulation and Registration

Speech Pathology Australia advocated strongly for the inclusion of the speech pathology profession in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS). Unfortunately, to date speech pathologists are not an included profession. In the absence of national registration, SPA has progressed work in establishing the National Alliance of Self-Regulating Health Professions (NASRHP) to facilitate the development of a National Framework for Self-Regulation for Health Professionals. Where possible, this national framework mirrors that required by NRAS in relation to monitoring and systematic self-regulation mechanisms for quality and safety in the delivery of health care by these professions. This framework augments the existing operations of the Association in relation to developing and maintaining the clinical, educational and ethical standards that promote high quality and safe speech pathology care. The Certified Practicing Speech Pathology (CPSP) program is the foundation of speech pathology as a self-regulated profession. The CPSP credential is recognised by funding programs such as Medicare, Department of Veteran Affairs and private health funds so that patients can access rebates for payments for evidenced based speech pathology services. SPA will continue to advocate for inclusion of speech pathologists in the NRAS during the current review process.

Senate Inquiry into Speech and Language Disorders and Speech Pathology Services

Speech Pathology Australia successfully lobbied the federal Senate Community Affairs References Committee to enquire into the impact of communication and swallowing disorders and access to speech pathology services in Australia. The Committee embarked on an Inquiry in December 2013 focused on the prevalence of speech, language and communication disorders in Australia and speech pathology services (see http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Speech_Pathology). The Committee is anticipated to publish their report on 1st September 2014.
Five public hearings were held throughout June with 24 organisations providing evidence as well as site visits occurring in each of the hearing locations. Over 300 submissions were made to the Inquiry. Key themes raised during the inquiry relating to the provision of speech pathology services and prevalence of communication impairment in rural and remote Australia included:

- Rural populations have higher than average prevalence and incidence rates for some conditions that cause communication impairments – and the burden of illness may be more severe for them. For example, rural people suffering a stroke are unlikely to have timely access to specialised stroke units – may be left with more severe communication impairment and then unable to access appropriate specialised speech pathology services within their communities.
- Aboriginal people have a significant need for speech pathology services due to the prevalence of conductive hearing loss associated with recurrent Otitis Media in childhood.
- Speech pathologists working in rural and remote Australia often have a ‘generalist’ role in that they treat patients across the range of ages, conditions and causes.
- There is a critical shortage of publicly funded speech pathology services in rural and remote Australia. Public services are characterised by long wait lists, long waiting times, consultative and assessment models of care as opposed to therapeutic care and extremely restricted eligibility to the most severe of cases.
- There is a critical shortage of private sector speech pathology services in rural and remote Australia – and access is limited by both geographic location and ability to pay for services.
- While it is not possible to determine the exact number of speech pathologists working in Australia, recent information from Health Workforce Australia (see [https://www.hwa.gov.au/sites/default/files/HWA_Speech_Pathologists_in_Focus_V1.pdf](https://www.hwa.gov.au/sites/default/files/HWA_Speech_Pathologists_in_Focus_V1.pdf)) indicate that numbers of speech pathologists are dramatically lower in regional and remote areas than in the major capital cities. There are only 12.7 speech pathologists per 100,000 people in remote areas, compared to 25.9 in Australia’s major cities. In very remote areas, this is reduced to 5.9 per population for 100,000 people.
- Rural based speech pathology services have responded to unmet demand for services through a range of mechanisms including innovative service delivery such as outreach, hub and spoke models or tele-practice. There has been very limited Commonwealth funding and program support to incentivise rural service delivery for speech pathology.
- Challenges in recruitment, retention and professional support for speech pathologists in rural Australia are significant and similar to those faced by other health professions.

**International Communication Project 2014**

The International Communication Project 2014 (ICP2014) aims to raise awareness internationally of the vital importance of communication to all aspects life and the critical difference that speech pathologists can make. Collaborative work has been undertaken with speech pathology associations in Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, the USA and Australia and the project has been endorsed by the International Association of Logopedics and Phoniatrics (IALP). A number of marketing, communications and public relations campaigns have been undertaken as part of ICP2014 in each participating country.

**National Disability Insurance Scheme**

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is driving transformational change in speech pathology service provision for people with disabilities. The current NDIS implementation environment is dynamic, rapidly changing and characterised by a lack of clarity regarding eligibility and service delivery for clients with communication impairments. There are clear signals of an increase in demand for all services, including speech pathology. There has recently been improvements in the engagement with the Association (and other organisations) by the NDIS.

Amanda O'Keefe Speech Pathologist SPA – Rural and Remote Member Community