Speech therapy and audiology

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Photos: Lt John Sverdloff

The roots of profession of speech therapy and audiology were established during World War II. Clinics were developed to test the hearing of soldiers who returned from the frontline with hearing loss as a result of exposure to excessively loud sounds (gunfire and bomb blasts). Many of these soldiers also acquired communication disorders owing to injuries to the head, face and throat and they had to be rehabilitated to regain functional oral communication.

Today the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS) provides SANDF members and their dependants with the services of speech therapists and audiologists.

Health care professionals (HCPs) in this profession in the SAMHS are qualified both in speech, language and voice therapy, and in hearing testing and hearing therapy after obtaining a 4-year degree. They then do community service for a year before registering as independent practitioners with the Health Professions Council of South Africa.

Speech therapy and audiology is an exciting, dynamic, ancillary health care profession that assists those with hearing impairment and verbal communication.

SPEECH THERAPY

Assessment and treatment are provided for patients (from newborn babies to the aged) with speech disorders and language and voice problems and feeding that occur for medical reasons. Their scope of practice includes:

- Stuttering
- Hoarseness and other voice disorders
- Difficulty in pronouncing certain sounds
- Verbal communication difficulties due to hearing loss
- Communication difficulties after stroke or brain injury
- Feeding difficulties in babies and adults
- Speech difficulties owing to cleft palate, orthodontic problems, etc
- Auditory perceptual difficulties in school-age children
- Delayed speech and language development in children
- Augmentative and alternative communication advice and devices

Speech therapists work closely with HCPs of other professions in interdisciplinary teams (IDTs) and play an integral role in rehabilitation.

AUDIOLOGY

Audiology is a preventative, diagnostic, counselling and rehabilitative profession. Audiologists also evaluate the need for hearing amplification and fit hearing aids and other devices.

Their scope of practice consists of the following:

- Determination of hearing handicap for medical boards
- Fitting of hearing aids
- Counselling hearing aid users
- Evaluation of possible cochlear implant candidates
- Rehabilitation of auditory deficiencies
- Provision of hearing results that are used for medical classification (for CHA, etc)

Audiologists work in conjunction with ear nose and throat (ENT) medical officers. All patients referred for diagnostic hearing tests are first examined by the ENT doctor.

The Audiology Service Unit at 1 Military Hospital acts as the co-ordinator of the SAMHS Cochlear Implant Programme and functions within an IDT.

Speech therapy and audiology services are available at 1 Military Hospital, 2 Military Hospital and 3 Military Hospital, while audiology at the Institute for Aviation Medicine specialises in industrial audiometry and balance disorders.

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