

Speaking easy

Stuttering can be socially devastating to those with the condition, but it can be overcome – and actor Sam Neill, activist Matt McCarten and judge Andrew Becroft are proof.



Health

BY LINLEY BONIFACE

It was King George VI's great misfortune that his ascent to the throne coincided with the rise of radio broadcasting. George VI dreaded public speaking because of his severe stutter, yet radio speeches would be crucial if he was to restore

public confidence in the monarchy after his brother's abdication – and lead his empire into war.

As a child, George VI was bullied mercilessly for stuttering. According to his biographer, Robert Lacey, home was no sanctuary: "His brothers and sisters were allowed to make fun of his stammer, ragging him without mercy after the style set by his father's quarter-deck chaff, and he withdrew still more tightly into himself."

His early radio speeches were an ordeal

for both him and for the listening public, prompting Adolf Hitler to describe him as "a simpleton". Salvation eventually arrived in the unlikely form of self-trained Australian voice therapist Lionel Logue, who used breathing exercises, tongue-twisters and psychological counselling to help the King speak to his people.

The relationship between George VI and Logue is the subject of a new movie, *The King's Speech*. Stuttering is often played for laughs or used to suggest a character is weak, criminal or dim, but

The King's Speech has been heralded as the first film to convincingly show what it is like to have to battle to make yourself understood.

At New Zealand's Stuttering Treatment and Research Trust (Start), speech language therapist Roz Young sees first-hand how debilitating stuttering can be. "One of the worst things about stuttering is that it can be very unpredictable," says Young, who works with adults. "People have told me that sometimes they can speak entirely fluently, but at other times they're unable to say 'hello' when they pick up the phone."

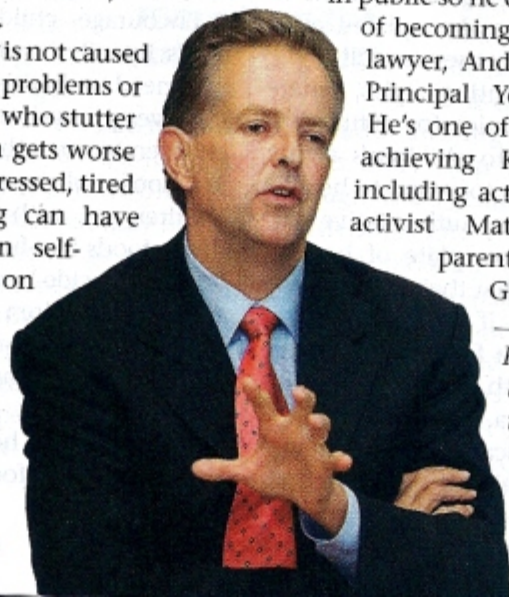
Some stutterers who struggle to say their own name have changed names – only to find they start stuttering on the new name, and the one they adopt after that. Young worked with one woman who, unable to say her husband's name, would introduce him as "Thingey".

The myth Young has heard most often is that "nerves" are responsible for a stutter. Others about the causes of stuttering have included a baby's toes being tickled, a child's hair being cut before he or she starts to talk and – rather more dramatically – a child being cursed by the devil.

Nowadays, stuttering is known to be a physical disorder. It appears to be caused by a problem with the neural processing needed for producing speech. There also seems to be a genetic predisposition towards developing a stutter, as it often runs in families.

Although stuttering is not caused by trauma, emotional problems or bad parenting, people who stutter may find their speech gets worse if they feel nervous, stressed, tired or excited. Stuttering can have a corrosive effect on self-esteem, taking a toll on everything from personal relationships

Andrew Becroft took training to learn to handle his stutter.



JANUARY 22 2011 LISTENER

to career choices. In a video on Start's website, former All Black Royce Williams says he "suffered horrifically" as a teenager because of his stutter.

Before the age of five, 5-10% of children go through a period of stuttering, but three-quarters of them grow out of it. Boys are more likely than girls to stutter into adulthood; around four out of every five adult stutterers is male. About 40,000 New Zealanders have the disorder.

Early intervention is very important.

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Start uses the Lidcombe Program, which teaches parents to praise "smooth" talking and pay less attention to "bumpy" talking in preschoolers and young school children. Start speech language therapist Janelle Forman, who works with this age group, says the approach has a very high success rate and appears to be enough to rewrite the brains of many

young children.

After the age of about nine, treatment aims to help people control rather than eliminate their stutter. As well as learning fluency strategies, people may be encouraged to work on communication skills or the limiting thought patterns they may have developed about themselves.

Start runs week-long intensive courses for adults who stutter. "At the end of it, they usually not only are very fluent but have hugely increased confidence," says Young.

At an intensive course many years ago, Young worked with a lawyer who wanted to gain the confidence to speak in public so he could fulfil his dream of becoming a court lawyer. The lawyer, Andrew Becroft, is now Principal Youth Court Judge. He's one of a number of high-achieving Kiwis who stutter, including actor Sam Neill, social activist Matt McCarten and parenting advocate Ian Grant. ■

For more information about stuttering, go to the Start website, www.stuttering.co.nz.