

Masters of communication

Speech and language therapists are in big demand, reports Angela McCarthy

SPEECH and language therapists assist in the rehabilitation of speech and language difficulties with children and adults through education, health and rehabilitation settings.

Massey University's four-year professional degree combines academic coursework and supervised clinical experience. Study includes language disorders, phonological and articulation disorders, fluency, voice, motor speech, aphasia, and swallowing (dysphagia) disorders.

The degree has a strong science component. The first year covers anatomy, physiology of speech, linguistics, psychology as a natural science and subjects related to children's language disorders. Students also do pre-clinical observations. The following three years then expand students' knowledge of children and adult disorders.

As well as a full academic workload, students complete a minimum of 300 clinical contact hours, alongside practising speech-language therapists. Students must experience a range of adults, children, different client populations and different clinical settings.

In the second year, students work one day a week at Massey University's Albany campus speech language therapy clinic. In the first semester of their third year, students do an intensive academic block, then

a six-week placement off campus. In the second semester they do three days in class and two days on placement. The first half of their fourth year, students do two days clinical placement each week, plus classes. Their final semester includes an eight-week block placement.

There is a global shortage of speech language therapists. In New Zealand two universities — Canterbury and Massey — offer degrees in speech and language therapy. They also offer master's postgraduate qualifications, as does the University of Auckland.

Graduate

Jennifer Sissingh

Graduated in 2008

Speech and language therapist

Cavit ABI Rehabilitation

I have been working about a year for Cavit ABI Rehabilitation, a residential facility providing early intensive rehabilitation. On average clients are with us 80 to 90 days but some stay up to 18 months.

Brain injury clients manifest the whole range of speech language therapy, from speech and speech production to understanding of language and thinking (cognition), which means they can't do some tasks or remember things or are unable to problem solve, reason or work out consequences.

Brain injury can also affect communication, such as understanding abstract information like humour and sarcasm, and non-verbal cues such as reading people's facial expressions.

A typical client could be someone who has been assaulted and has a severe brain injury affecting speech, swallowing, thinking and memory. My primary focus would be to make sure he had a safe swallow, so he could eat and drink without causing problems to his lungs and also receive sufficient nutrition.

The swallowing problems might create a husky voice, so I would work on improving the way his voice sounds and increasing breath support. I'd assess the client's ability to express themselves, and attend to information and instructions. Often people can't remember verbal instructions in early stages of brain injury so we suggest keeping notes or using diaries.

I began studying speech language therapy full time when I turned 50. I'd always worked in health, most recently as an orthoptist (eye-muscle disorders). I changed to speech language therapy because I wanted to get back into therapy work.

Adjusting to academic study was a huge challenge as a mature student, particularly computer technology. But I thoroughly enjoyed it, won a

Massey scholarship, and am now undertaking part-time postgraduate papers in the area of brain injury.

It is a comprehensive degree and while I did wonder whether I'd use everything we covered, I've found it has all been useful.

I became interested in brain injury after doing a paper about it. Then one of my tutors got work for me with a community client with significant communication difficulties. That experience cemented my interest.

Working in this field has made me realise the great importance of communication and how the inability to communicate can so strongly affect earning, living and friendships.

Employer

Tony Young

Rehabilitation team

manager of ABI

Rehabilitation

ABI Rehabilitation provides residential rehabilitation to people who've sustained a moderate to severe brain injury. Our specialist team includes a rehab consultant, rehab nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, clinical psychologists, social worker, and speech and language therapists. The speech language therapist's role is to work with the client, family and team to maximise the



Highly skilled: Speech and language Therapist Jennifer Sissingh specialises in helping people with brain injuries

client's rehabilitation potential. Their skill set lies in the ability to assess and treat swallow function and communication skills.

When a person is waking from coma, speech and language therapists establish if they have a safe or compromised swallow, then outline how to manage that situation. For severe brain injured clients, they will also establish the level of understanding the person has and a consistent way for the person to express basic wants and needs. In the later stages, they may still be involved with

improving someone's swallow but also with higher assessments and treatments such as improving social communication skills or reading facial expressions.

Jennifer works very well within a team environment. She has a keen interest in the field of brain injury and was very motivated to develop skills in this area.

■ angela@careerideas.co.nz

TRAINING PLACE

■ **Qualifications:**

Bachelor of Speech and Language Therapy (BSLT)

■ Massey University (Albany, Auckland)

■ **Contact:** Ph 0800 MASSEY (0800 627 739) or (09) 4140800, contact@massey.ac.nz or txt 5222, www.massey.ac.nz

■ **Entry Requirements:**

Domestic: NCEA University Entrance over three approved subjects, including minimum 14 credits in Level 3 English, plus 16 credits or more in either Level 3 calculus, statistics, biology, chemistry, or physics. Adult entry requirements on website. Must also complete entry form and attend interview to assess communication and interpersonal skills.

■ **International:** If not applying through NCEA, check English language requirements on website.

■ **Tertiary fees 2010:** \$5810 (domestic)

■ **Graduate Starting Salary:** About \$42,000

■ **Intake:** 25 a year, of which about a quarter are mature students.