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Speech-language pathology: A young profession in an ageing world

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In 35 years' time, anyone who remembers Webwords may pause for a bit on 4 December to think about the 105th anniversary of her birth. Unlike **Clint Eastwood**¹, Webwords doesn't want to be 105. She is comfortably adjusted to the idea that she will not be available to say "Happy Birthday" to you, or to see what the fashionable septuagenarian SLP/SLT is wearing: when you, dear reader, will be...**how old**? Putting it another way, when 2050 ticks around, will you be among the projected 22.7% of Australians aged 65 years or more, or the 5.1% over 85? And, if this is important to you, might you still be working between 65 and 85 and beyond?

If **Susan Ryan**², Australia's inaugural Age Discrimination Commissioner's plans pan out, you could well be. Dr Dr Ryan (who has not one, not two, but *three* honorary doctorates) bemoans the current situation in which millions of older Australians are locked out of the workforce by age discrimination, and the consequent waste of human capital. The commission she heads is bent on changes that will see laws and policies reformed to ensure that people's decision to **work past their 60s**⁴ is safe and uncontroversial.

Such flexibility would have been unthinkable in most work settings 35 years ago, the year that Azaria Chamberlain was killed by a dingo at Uluru, Candice Reed 12 days her senior and Australia's first "test tube baby" was born, Malcolm Fraser was prime minister, Zelman Cowan governor general and Mary Buttifant **President of our Association**⁵. As well in 1980, Channel 9 launched the quiz show *Sale of the Century*, the Great Barrier Reef was given World Heritage listing, and Webwords had been an SLP for a decade, in an era when speech pathology was still a nice thing for a nice girl to do. Not many men adorned the profession in those days. We used to talk about it.

Some things change, some stay the same

Not many men adorn the profession these days. We talk about it still. Men comprise 3% of the 2015 Speech Pathology Australia (SPA) member base of 4,178 women and 142 men who together represents 80% of the overall SLP workforce in Australia. On 2 February 2015, Marni Bradley, SPA's Manager of Member Services and Operations, kindly emailed Webwords the figures displayed in Table 1. They were drawn from this year's membership renewals and new memberships to date. Moments later, another email from the association came with the welcome

announcement of Dr Jade Cartwright as the 2016 National Tour Speaker, presenting two-day workshops on "Speech Pathology Services for People Living with Dementia across the Continuum of Care".

Table 1. Selected SPA new, renewing and student member characteristics, 2 Feb. 2015

Male & female SPA members (excluding students) by age N = 4,320		Male SPA members (excluding students) by age N = 142		Student SPA members only N = 123	
Age	Proportion	Age	Proportion	Gender	Total
22–34	45.14%	24–34	55%	Female	118
44–35	26.51%	35–44	47%	Male	5
54–45	17.17%	45–54	22%		
64–55	9.45%	55–64	14%		
>65	1.73%	>65	4%		

Source: <http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/images/spastats2feb2015.png>

This timely news prompted Webwords to wonder how many SPA members worked with older people. It turned out that on their joining or renewal forms 1,949 members said they worked with adults (18–65), 870 worked with "the aged" (over 65), and 1,991 worked with both populations (18–65 and >65). If that means that 2,861 SPA members work with over-65s, 93.89% of them are missing out on helpful discussions in SPA's **Ageing and Aged Care Member Community**⁶ on Facebook, with its membership of just 175. The Trusty Webwords Crystal Ball (TWCB) confidently predicts that the 2016 National Tour will attract better numbers than *that!*

At present, the Australian speech pathology workforce consisting of SPA members (80%) and non-members (20%), has a young age profile, with fewer than 10% aged 55 years and over (HWA, 2014). Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2012) comparison data between self-reports by members of medical and allied health professions show that SLPs are in the lowest median age group (30–34 years), have one of the lowest percentages of people aged 55 years and over (6.8%) and the highest percentage of employed females (97.5%).

HelpAge International

Whatever your age, and wherever you are, it will not have escaped you that we live in an ageing world and that population ageing is altering economies and societies worldwide. But did you know that by 2050 nearly one in five people in developing countries would be over 60? As a global movement for the rights of elders, **HelpAge International**⁷ helps older people assert their rights, counter intolerance and overcome poverty so that they can enjoy dignified, safe, dynamic and healthy lives. In conjunction with more than 100 affiliates, the organisation works in Africa, the Caribbean, East Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and South Asia. It lists among its 2014 achievements having reached 1.5 million vulnerable old folk and their families, improved pension schemes in 14 countries and supported 250,000 older people in accessing health services.

What do you mean, “older”?

HelpAge International's photo gallery and stories, the Twitter accounts it **follows**⁸, the World Health Organization's **Ageing and Life-course**⁹ program, and *The Lancet*'s series of six **papers on ageing**¹⁰ reveal that the concept of codger, crumbly, elder, geriatric, old-buffer-old-dear-old-dog-old-fossil-old-soul-old-timer, **older or elderly person**¹¹, senior citizen or war-horse varies greatly. Some individuals count themselves “old” in their 50s and 60s; some agencies such as National Seniors Australia serve people 50 and over; while our federal government's Home and Community Care services are available to eligible citizens 65 years or older, or 50 years or older to Indigenous Australians who qualify.

APA mythbuster

Does the expression “older Australian” imply a 50- to 65-year-old? While it obviously does for some, in 2007 the Australian Psychological Society (APS) surveyed 1,500 people, finding that 52% of 18- to 40-year-old respondents believed a person is not “aged” until their 70s, while 55% of respondents aged 61 years or more viewed people as “aged” once they were in their 80s. Amanda Gordon, APS president at the time, commented optimistically, “Rather than the common myth of a dreary old age, the majority of Australians are looking forward to older age and retirement, with benefits including freedom, an active social life and spending more time with family.” Analysis of the responses from older Australians showed common difficulties, for which the APS offers **easy-to-follow advice**¹² about **ageing positively**¹³, were around: maintaining health and fitness; maintaining social networks and activities; experiencing feelings of sadness and loss; ensuring financial security; dealing with decreases in mobility and an increased reliance on others.

A-to-Z of ageing

Word-game loving SLPs/SLTs with time to fritter could quickly generate an unhappy A-to-Z of ageing from **Alzheimer's**¹⁴ to Zimmer Frames; or a happy one from Anniversaries (more of those than you can poke a memory stick at, with luck) to **Zest for life**¹⁵. But it struck Webwords that it is all about As and Ds among many of the older people we engage with, personally and professionally.

The Ageing As can be: an older person's inspiring Attitude: their Acceptance and Appreciation of getting

on – and getting on with it; their Affirmation of life despite its vicissitudes; their Adaptation to a loss such as retirement from the paid workforce or a bereavement; their Accommodation and Adjustment to changes in location and lifestyle. Aspirational As for the community at large might include more general Acknowledgement of older Australians' contributions to society, for example, as informal carers and volunteers. The not-so-positive As might include Alzheimer's, Aphasia, Arthritis, Atherosclerosis, patronising “**Ah, blesses**”¹⁶ and the like. The positive Ds (Decisiveness, Determination, Durability) are a little difficult to pin down, but Dentistry and Dentures to one side, the disheartening ones – only one of which is inevitable – include the recurrent Dad-joke recounted several times daily, Dementia¹⁷ of family members and **carers**¹⁸ of people who are dementing, Dysphagia, Deafness, Depression and **Death**¹⁹.

Working with people

Speech Pathology Australia is the lead organisation to inform and advance the directions speech pathology takes in this country. Its current and well-considered **Strategic Plan**²⁰ reveals the vision, values and key objectives for the organisation for 2014–16. In it, aged care shares centre stage, along with speech pathologists in schools, disability, and juvenile justice, within its overarching lobbying plan and annual business plans. The Strategic Plan emphasises the importance of “working with” instead of “working on behalf of” people of all ages with communication and swallowing disorders.

It is impossible to predict *exactly* how the profession will deal with its changing roles as the demand for services for older people increases. Will the pattern of female dominance, and workforce attrition from full-time to part-time work after 10 years of service (HWA, 2014) persist? Will the profession stay “young”? Will someone find a magical way of ensuring adequate services in rural, regional, and remote Australia or to make waiting lists for services a thing of the past? What will our fabulous profession look like 35 years from now? Will it be exemplary? Will it be raining men?



Source: <http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/images/crystal.jpg>

Even the TWCB is silent on these matters so Webwords cannot say. But what she will say is, Happy Birthday for 2050!

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2012). *Census of population and housing, 1996 to 2011*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Health Workforce Australia (HWA). (2014). *Australia's Health Workforce Series: Speech pathology in focus*. Retrieved 5 Feb 2015 from http://www.hwa.gov.au/sites/default/files/HWA_Speech_Pathologists_in_Focus_V1.pdf

Links

1. <http://abc7.com/archive/9082634>
2. <http://www.calculator.net/age-calculator.html>
3. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/commissioners/age-and-disability-discrimination-commissioner-hon-susan-ryan-ao>
4. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/working-past-our-60s-reforming-laws-and-policies-2012>
5. <http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/about-spa/council/past-councils>
6. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SPAAgeingAgedCare>
7. <http://www.helpage.org>
8. <https://twitter.com/helpage/following>
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15. <https://au.lifestyle.yahoo.com/prevention/a/16314686/dr-rosemary-stanton>
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18. <http://www.thesocialcareelf.net/populations-and-settings/family-carers/terrible-maze-dementia-carers-experiences-health-social-care>
19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mRec3VbH3w>
20. http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/library/Core_Assoc_Doc/6136_SPA_Strategic%20Plan_OUT2_LR.pdf

Webwords 52 is at www.speech-language-therapy.com with live links to featured and additional resources.