

What is a Speech Pathologist?

A Speech Pathologist is a health professional with expertise in the assessment and management of communication, feeding and swallowing disorders. A speech pathologist may work in a number of different settings including hospitals and community health centres. Clients include babies, children and adults with difficulties which may be due to known or unknown conditions such as cerebral palsy and developmental delay, or with acquired difficulties due to accident or illness such as stroke, traumatic head injury, and degenerative diseases (e.g. Parkinson's disease) or dementia.

A Speech Pathologist often works as part of a multidisciplinary team including other health care professionals to ensure the maximisation of the client's abilities by using skills a client has and working to develop or improve areas of deficit. Therapy may be carried out in individual sessions with the client and their carers or in group sessions.

Roles of a Speech Pathologist

A Speech Pathologist is trained in a variety of areas and may be in a position in a generalist role or may specialise in a particular area, for example:

- Assessment and management of communication disorders including:
 - Problems expressing ideas, thinking of words, using inappropriate words, forming sentences
 - Difficulty understanding what is said
 - Underlying problems with reading and writing
 - Difficulty producing sounds and speaking clearly
 - Voice Disorders
 - Stuttering, problems with the flow of speech
 - Delayed or disordered language development
 - Specific language impairment
 - Social use of language and communication behaviour
- Design and use of communication aids such as picture boards and computer based systems
- Assessment and management of swallowing problems including participation in use of x-ray to investigate swallowing difficulties
- Provide education to client's, families, the community and other staff members
- Involvement in health promotion, quality improvement activities and research
- Advocacy for clients and the community

A Speech Pathologist may work in a number of different settings:

- Hospitals, in medical and surgical areas as well as rehabilitation and outpatients
- Community Health Centres
- Specialist centres such as the Stuttering Unit
- Schools, preschools and early childhood centres

Roles of a Social Worker in Hospitals

Social Workers in hospitals see patients and their family/carer where psychosocial, emotional and environmental factors have contributed to the diagnosis, recovery, rehabilitation and discharge of the patient, or when a crisis is created for the patient and family as a result of illness, trauma and hospitalization.

They provide crisis intervention and counselling and discharge planning. As a member of a multidisciplinary team, Social Workers work with all age groups and diagnostic groups with people who have a long term chronic life threatening illness, and people who have been suddenly injured or disabled.

Career Opportunities

In the public health system a new graduate will begin as a grade 1. As grading becomes higher greater clinical experience and administrative responsibility is expected. With greater experience the opportunity to supervise speech pathology students is available. Also in the higher graded positions, there is a role for clinical and administrative supervision of the other staff, and opportunity to progress to be a manager of a service.

Speech pathologists work in public hospitals, rehabilitation centres, community and mental health services, schools, kindergartens and specialist organisations providing services for people with disabilities. Speech pathologists can also work in private practice. Some are engaged in teaching and research. It is a small occupation with good employment prospects.

Qualifications Required

To become a speech pathologist you usually have to study speech pathology at university. Prerequisite subjects, or assumed knowledge, in one or more of English, biology, chemistry, mathematics and advanced English are normally required.

Supervision Required

New graduates generally have supervision by a senior member of the service they work for, their service manager and/or an area advisor. The professional association also coordinates a mentoring scheme in which a new graduate is paired with a more experienced person from outside their workplace but with the same area of interest. A comprehensive orientation program is provided for all new staff members with ongoing support.

What sort of person should I be?

- Friendly
- Enthusiastic
- Patient
- Open minded
- Flexible.

Personal Requirements of a Speech Pathologist

Excellent written and oral communication, well organised, good time manager, empathetic, patient, able to work independently or in a team as needed, good problem solving ability, an ability to adapt to diverse client groups.

- Good listening and interpersonal skills
- Enjoy language and communication
- Able to inspire confidence and cooperation
- Enjoy working with people
- A patient and tactful approach to people's problems
- Able to deal with complex and unusual situations