CAPSULE COMMENTARIES

Capsule Commentary on Perez, Doig-Acuna, and Starrels, “Not Unless It’s a Life or Death Thing”: A Qualitative Study of the Health Care Experiences of Adults Who Stutter

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Stuttering is a widespread disorder, affecting 70 million people worldwide, approximately 1% of the population; 75 to 80% of adult stutters are male.¹ The qualitative study by Perez, Doig-Acuna, and Starrels found that stuttering affected the ability of patients to interact in health care settings, including discomfort in speaking with the health care team, avoidance of health care interactions, and reliance on a third party to assist with health care navigation. Furthermore, the ability to discuss stuttering with their physicians required trust and rapport, along with self-acceptance, in order for them to speak assertively.²

“Extensive research has shown that no matter how knowledgeable a clinician might be, if he/she is not able to open good communication channels with the patient, he/she may be of no help.”³ Effective communication skills foster good health care outcomes in terms of patient participation in their care, adherence to treatment, self-management, and satisfaction with the health care system.⁴ This research highlights the need for increased awareness and training of the entire health care team in caring for a person who stutters.² Modern technology such as secure messaging, online appointment scheduling, automated check-in, online or automated telephone prescription refills, and access to electronic records may ease the burden of those who stutter. However, while such non-verbal tools could empower patients, they might simply be a form of avoidance.²

Study limitations included the use of a convenience sample among attendees of the National Stuttering Association (NSA) conference. Active members of the NSA fared better, with fewer negative effects of stuttering, more successful speech

therapy, and a significant difference in the life impact of stuttering in terms of avoiding speaking situations and letting stuttering interfere with work and school, as well as in their ability to talk about stuttering with family, friends, and co-workers.⁵ It is likely that a different sample may have revealed a greater health communication burden.

This study provides an excellent glimpse of how stuttering can affect medical interactions, from the front desk office staff to the healthcare provider. Future research with diverse populations in terms of demographic, socioeconomic, and health status are needed to truly appreciate the effect of stuttering and the interventions needed, be they technological or personal, to serve this population throughout the healthcare system.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest with regard to this article.

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