

Speech Therapy Has Outgrown its Room at the Home

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** A hip fracture put John in the hospital. Aided by rehabilitation, his hip is healing. But another complication is interfering with his health. Seemingly out of the blue, the simple acts of chewing and swallowing have become mysteriously difficult.*

*Lena has a progressive memory disorder. Difficulty recalling words that used to be familiar to her, words like “ice cream,” is one of the effects of her illness.

A generation ago, when John’s father had a similar difficulty with swallowing, his caregivers knew that if he couldn’t eat, he wouldn’t get better. But they didn’t know what to do. And the effects of a memory disorder like Lena’s also was seen as a problem without a solution.

Today, speech-language pathologists offer numerous strategies to counter the effects of aging on the ability to communicate. At the Rose Blumkin Jewish Home, Speech Pathologist Jennifer Flanagan works with people like “John” to strengthen the muscles of his throat so he can swallow food safely. The muscles that aid in his swallowing probably have been deteriorating for some time as a course of normal aging, but he didn’t notice the gradual changes that were occurring long before the hip fracture. Now, with his body working to heal the fractured hip, he is no longer able to compensate for the reduced muscle strength.

Flanagan also teaches people like “Lena” to gesture or draw pictures to express her needs and wants, even when she can’t find the right words. This is only one strategy Flanagan teaches Residents with neurological and memory disorders, to help them avoid the isolation and



Jennifer Flanagan, a speech/language pathologist at the Rose Blumkin Jewish Home, looks over results of evaluations of a Resident before making recommendations for therapy.

frustration that accompany difficulty communicating.

Therapies such as those offered by speech and language professionals were misunderstood and underutilized when the current Home was built. Certainly no one could anticipate how valuable these services would become, or the need for sufficient space to be allocated in which to provide them in a comfortable and dignified way. Currently, speech, swallowing and communication therapies are shoe-horned into a corner of the crowded Physical and Occupational Therapy room. While re-learning communication skills ideally would take place in a quiet, private space, the current arrangement is anything but quiet and private. Instead there are the distractions of constant activity and background noise from a busy occupational and physical therapy program.

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Thanks to the field of Speech-Language Pathology and professionals like Flanagan, a swallowing or communication disorder is often a temporary setback, not the foretelling of a downward spiraling quality of life. And while neurological and memory disorders aren't reversible, today we know more about lowering the frustration levels of the people experiencing them, while assisting them to compensate for their deficits.

"Many people think that Speech-Language Pathologists work only on communication, but it's much more than that," Flanagan said. "Frequently, we also work with Residents who are experiencing difficulty with swallowing and eating, so they can continue to get their most basic needs met – nutrition and hydration.

"We also work with Residents' ability to reason, solve problems, to recall information, and to express basic wants and needs," she said. "We help people perform at their best."

For example, when you want ice cream, but can't find the words, one of your choices is to pretend to lick an ice cream cone. It's just ice cream, but the process fills one of your basic needs—to communicate with other humans and have them understand what you want.

In a "new" Jewish Home, these services will operate in space designed especially for them.

"When we first started offering Speech Therapy, it was virtually impossible to determine the demand in the years to come," said Mike Silverman, executive director of Jewish Senior Services and the Rose Blumkin Jewish Home. "But this is another of many instances in which the services we offer have outgrown what even the most creative staff can reasonably accommodate in a 25-year-old building. We are looking forward to the future when these services will be provided in a private, dedicated space where Residents will work one-on-one with therapists to regain their independence."