

Aphasia centres grew from Stouffville

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while working in home care in the 1980s. Parkview Village in Stouffville supported the program from the start, offering it a place to meet with clients and more volunteers came from the Stouffville community.

The group received funding in the fall of 1989 from the Seniors Independence Program and then from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care beginning in 1990. The York Durham Aphasia Centre also holds annual roll and wheel-a-thon fundraisers.

"Aphasia is a chronic issue," Mrs. Patterson said. That means clients have to be supported over a number of years to keep learning and improving their communication skills.

At the Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care in Markham, people sit around two tables talking animatedly in a bright, cheerful room decorated with Chinese art prints and signs in English and Cantonese. Although their speech isn't the swiftest and they're using gestures, smiles and help from staff at the centre, their joy in being able to communicate with the others around the table is evident.

To encourage them to speak, facilitators at the Monday morning program use gestures, write down key words, draw pictures and have clients point to letters, words or pictures. The team at the aphasia centre in the Yee Hong Centre includes speech pathologists, communicative disorder assistants and volunteers.

Many of the clients here are able to express themselves to some degree and continue to improve. Markham resident George Lau suffered a stroke in 2004. He was getting ready to talk to the group later that morning about his first house.

He is surprisingly articulate in English and also speaks Mandarin and Cantonese. During a part of the program, called the Gavel Club, members talk about everything. Mr. Lau explains carefully and clearly.

With the help of communicative disorder assistant Anne Hrabí from Stouffville, Mr. Lau tells about how he came here from Hong Kong in 1992. The lively senior was an electrical engineer in Hong Kong for 30 years.

His wife, Lai Bing, drives him to the centre Monday mornings and his speech has improved, he said.

He finds the speech and movement part of the morning helpful. While doing a form of tai chi Monday morning, the clients also describe what they were doing, such as saying "Up", when raising their arms, for instance.

Ms. Hrabí was delighted that Mr. Lau had come up with the word "descending" when lowering his arm during the exercise.

Ms. Hrabí speaks slowly and clearly when addressing clients and writes the key words of the conversation on a pad of paper which she holds up for the client to see.

People with aphasia often lose their second language and retain more of their mother tongue.

A dictionary of common words was developed at the Yee Hong Centre with words written in English and Cantonese with a phonetic rendition of the Cantonese. Pictures accompany most of the words to make it easier for clients.

Different languages present challenges. Some clients, for instance, can point to alphabet boards, Mrs. Patterson said, but when it comes to the Chinese languages, that can't be done. There are about 6,000 Chinese symbols and they won't fit on one board.

When they first come to one of the

aphasia centres, clients work with a facilitator, often a volunteer or speech pathology or communicative disorder assistant student, to make up their own life history books. In pictures, photographs, drawings from children or grandchildren and simple sentences written in large letters, the client's life becomes in a very real sense an open book. Clients can also use the book on their own to help them communicate when they are out in the community or at home.

The York Durham Aphasia Centre has programs in Richmond Hill, Newmarket, Markham, Stouffville and Maple, as well as Whitby and Peterborough.

The programs are well-recognized in the health care system, Mrs. Patterson said.

The Markham program runs more

smoothly because of its five volunteers, some of whom speak Cantonese.

In Maple, staff and volunteers have developed an Italian pictiory, for their clients and "use gestures", staffer Natalie Wint said.

"Aphasia is complicated by a second language, she added.

The centre has earned the praise of the Community Care Access Centre, which provides access to health care in the region.

"They are very client-focussed," executive director Cathy Szabo said. "And they are a large part of our care planning with clients. They took their approach from a small level and made it bigger and bigger."

For more information on the program, log on to ydac.on.ca



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Student facilitators Natalie Wint (left) and Sheri Rutherford work with aphasia patients Marilyn Taylor, George Lau, Joan Duncan, Giovanna Di Napoli and Alexandra Brookes at the York Durham Aphasia Centre in Markham Monday.



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