

# A listening ear

Using the latest technology and a ton of patience and care, this therapist teaches children with hearing impairments to talk.

■ By KAYLENE TAN

**M**r Vasu Govindasamy is a senior Auditory-Verbal Therapist (AVT) working with three other therapists in the Listen & Talk programme at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

The Listen & Talk programme helps children "to listen, allowing speech and language to develop in a natural way following normal developmental stages".

The main aim of the programme is to give people with hearing impairments a chance to function independently in mainstream society. Recent advancements in technology have allowed early detection of hearing impairments. In addition, digital hearing aids and cochlear implants, which improve hearing, have made it possible for the deaf to live a more normal life.

Mr Vasu, 35, sees both children and adults with hearing impairments. The adults he sees often have post-lingual deafness, meaning that they lost their hearing after they learnt to speak.

Nowadays, newborns are tested for hearing loss by three months of age. Once diagnosed, therapy sessions at the Listen &

Talk programme can begin. Initially, the focus is on educating and counselling the parents, followed by weekly sessions with the child and family.

Mr Vasu explained: "The earlier the child begins therapy, the better his or her chances to develop spoken language normally, given no other major complication."

This experienced AVT sees about five patients each day. Parents or caregivers are given targets in speech, language, cognition and communication relative to their child's age and stage of development. For adults, Mr Vasu initially assesses their perception of speech and intervenes with auditory targets.

He said that the primary goals for the adult patient with hearing impairment is employability, and therapy is geared towards that. However, it is children that make up the bulk of Mr Vasu's caseload.

The unique thing about the Listen & Talk sessions with children is the parents' role in them. "The parents are the most im-

portant clients in a therapy session. Skills are transferred to them so that they can teach the child at home," he said.

One of the greatest challenges he faces is dealing with the parents. He said: "You can never become an expert in dealing with grief-stricken parents, especially just after their child is diagnosed. Sometimes they sit in silence, sometimes they talk about their hopes for the child. What you learn is compassion, patience and how to listen."

Education is another challenge for those working with the hearing impaired. "Many people have preconceived ideas about deafness — that they should go to the deaf school and communicate only through sign language," he said.

Every three months, the Listen & Talk team visits schools to conduct workshops with teachers to dispel myths about the deaf. He has gone to more than 70 schools and noted that the response has been very positive.

Working with people with disabilities is never easy. Mr Vasu admits that there are days when he feels he has a mountain to climb, but there are also life- and job-affirming days that make the hard work worth-



Compassion, patience and the ability to listen are important qualities for an audio-verbal therapist to have, says Mr Vasu Govindasamy.

while. He remembers an inspiring case of a three-year-old Indian patient whose parents were very upset about their daughter's condition. "But they took part in the therapy — the father was very involved. One day, the child said 'a pa' and the father broke down and cried. It's days like those where I feel — yes, that's why I'm here."

Mr Vasu takes pride in working in a world-renowned programme. He joined SGH when it launched the Listen & Talk programme in 2001. Prior to that, Mr Vasu worked for The Singapore School for the Deaf.

His desire to help the hearing

impaired began while he was in junior college when he befriended some people who were deaf. He received a scholarship from the National Council of Social Services (NCSS) to pursue a postgraduate degree in speech-language pathology at the University of Oklahoma's Health Science Centre.

He noted that to work as an AVT, a degree in speech-language pathology, audiology or education of the deaf is required. Unfortunately, none of these courses are available in Singapore. However, those who have a background in linguistics, language, education and

psychology can be trained by a certified AVT. Positive about the future for the hearing impaired, Mr Vasu said: "I think it is a matter of time before people accept the deaf as ordinary citizens. I hope that one day hearing aids will become as readily accepted as spectacles."

For more information about Listen & Talk, visit [www.listenandtalk.com.sg](http://www.listenandtalk.com.sg) or e-mail [golisten@sgh.com.sg](mailto:golisten@sgh.com.sg)

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