

cover story

Aphasia

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often in everyday life.

In fact, when a particularly difficult sentence is uttered, a collective round of laughter and clapping ripples around the table.

In the spotlight

Aphasia is caused by a stroke or other brain injury—aneurysm, trauma or tumor. While the condition impairs people's ability to express and understand spoken language, reading and writing, it has no effect on their intellect.

Most cases are caused by stroke, with the National Aphasia Association reporting 25 to 40 percent of stroke survivors acquire aphasia.

The disorder is in the spotlight now because the legislatively created New Jersey Aphasia Study Commission recently released its groundbreaking report showing an estimated 56,000 New Jerseyans live with aphasia. That's between one in 90 to one in 130 people—more than the number with Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis.

"All of the estimates were low before this," said Andrew Gomory, a commission member and CEO of Princeton-based Lingraphica, a company devoted solely to creating products and apps to help adults with



Charlie Stipo of Wantage reaches for a word while Roy Bampton of Morristown looks on. The Adler Aphasia Center's Aphasia Communication Group meets in space provided by Cornerstone Family Programs in Morristown. KAREN MANCINELLI/CORRESPONDENT

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aphasia.

Partly because of the New Jersey report, and others like it, he added, the National Aphasia Association doubled its estimate of how many people have aphasia nationwide: 1 million.

By 2020, the group estimates, the yearly number of new cases could double to 180,000.

But the report did more than quantify the problem. It also found most people with aphasia get the therapy they need, covered by insurance, but only in the initial months following their injury. After that, less than 2 percent are helped. Problem is, according to The Aphasia Hope Foundation, 60 percent of people with aphasia still have language impairments more than six months after a stroke.

Due to the neuroplasticity of the brain, experts says, many patients can improve their speech even years after brain damage.

People who work in the field say that the paucity of help is because of lack of awareness, that most people still don't even know what aphasia is.

"Everybody knew about heart disease and heart attacks and myocardial infarction. That was the focus for decades," said Dr. Mandy Binning, medical director of the Comprehensive Stroke Program at Capital Health, which has hospitals in Hopewell Township and Trenton.

"In the olden days, a stroke was thought of as something that was nontreatable, nonreversible," she added. "Stroke patients weren't given much of a chance. As we learn more about stroke, we learn there's a lot we can do to help the stroke patient's recover and gain independence and a somewhat normal life."

Momentum building

To keep improving life for aphasia patients, the commission will next set up a task force to implement its suggestions, including getting patients more speech therapy covered by insurance and more treatment for their mental health needs.

While there are no medications for aphasia, Binning said, patients can be helped by taking medicines for other conditions that coexist with aphasia, especially depression.

"Sometimes depression can impede therapy because the patients don't have the motivation, or they don't have any encouragement to really stick with their therapy," she explained. "So sometimes treating the depression or anxiety or insomnia, or whatever the comorbid condition is, can help."

Additionally, the task force is calling for more iterations of the successful programs that now exist, such as the Kean University Institute for Adults Living with Communication Disabilities, more online help, and more in-person support groups.

"Our goal is to create opportunities for other people living throughout the state to have communication groups," said Karen Tucker, executive director of the Adler Aphasia Center, with locations in Maywood and West Orange.

"We started the groups in Scotch Plains, Morristown, Union, Bridgewater, and now we also have one in Maywood on Fridays," she added. "We're starting one at Kean University Ocean campus in September."

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