

“The King’s Speech” Evokes Pain and Pride in those with Speech Disorders

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[ENTER LOCATION], DATE. The success of Oscar-nominated film “The King’s Speech” has given voice to a local community of once successful and articulate teachers, singers, clerks and lawyers who are now relegated to listening where they once led.

At a recent support group meeting, residents who suffer from the speech impairment known as spasmodic dysphonia, women and men spoke in broken and tremulous voices about the impact of the widely praised film about the stuttering of King George VI of England.

“You just have to look at Colin Firth’s face in that film to understand the shame and humiliation that comes from being helpless to make your voice produce the sounds you know should be there,” said one participant.

Spasmodic dysphonia is a neurological disorder of unknown origin that strikes previously normal speakers, usually in middle age, causing embarrassing and uncontrolled spasming of the vocal cords and speech that is harsh, broken and often difficult to understand. It is estimated that over 50,000 people in the U.S. suffer from the disorder.

“I’ve just about given up on my job search,” said another person with spasmodic dysphonia. “Even before I got into the interview, the receptionist turned to me and asked ‘Are you all right?’ I’m just blown away that someone with a disabling stammer could find the courage to speak to an entire nation.”

Kimberly Kuman, Executive Director of the National Spasmodic Dysphonia Association, based in suburban Chicago, said that the film had really struck a chord with the many patients around the country who struggle to make themselves heard and understood. “Our members feel a lot of pride in the story that the film tells. They know how much courage it takes to speak up when the sound of your voice is abnormal. So much of our personality gets expressed through the voice. It’s understandable that many people with spasmodic dysphonia deal with it by becoming reclusive, and decide to just avoid social interactions and pull back from the workplace.”

While research has not yet led to a cure for spasmodic dysphonia, injections of botulinum toxin through the neck and into the spasming vocal muscles can provide temporary relief for some patients, easing their speech for a period of time. But the vocal cord spasming invariably returns, squeezing the voice so the phonation of words and sentences again becomes choppy and broken.

Disabilities tend to be less surprising and more acceptable the more the general public is exposed to them. People with voice disorders, whether stuttering, spasmodic dysphonia or accident-related vocal cord injuries, will benefit from greater awareness of speech disorders after seeing King George’s struggle, so powerfully portrayed by Colin Firth in “The King’s Speech.” To find out more about spasmodic dysphonia, please visit www.dysphonia.org,

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