

Aphasia on the agenda

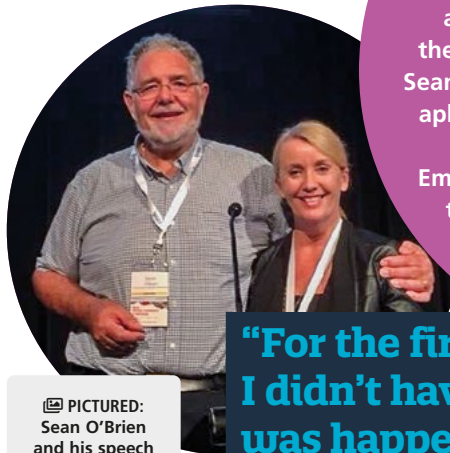
ACCORDING to the Australian Aphasia Rehabilitation Pathway, every six seconds a stroke will cause an individual to suffer from reduced quality of life. One of the ongoing disabilities, aphasia, is a condition few have heard of. But one long-time Rotarian is on a mission to change that.

Aphasia is a communication disability, caused by damage to the language centres of the brain. As well as stroke, the condition can be the result of a brain injury, brain tumour or degenerative disease, and sufferers experience impeded abilities to understand, speak, read and write.

While their intelligence remains unaffected, aphasia can take a serious toll on sufferers and their families, as Sean O'Brien, of the Rotary Club of Nepean, NSW, discovered first-hand. After a successful international career in sales, Sean suffered a stroke in 2013, with complications resulting in aphasia.

How to interact with a person who has aphasia

- Sit down with them and take time to talk
- Ensure only one person is talking at a time
- Find a common interest to chat about
- Talk normally, don't shout, but do pause between phrases
- Use an iPad or word book if you have one
- If you can't make the conversation work, let them know and try again later



PICTURED: Sean O'Brien and his speech pathologist Colleen Kerr presenting at the 2018 NSW Patient Experience Symposium, at Hilton Hotel Sydney, NSW.

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What would you do if you woke to a world where you could no longer say the words you wanted to say? If you're a Rotarian like Sean, you'd get out there and change the world. Hear from Sean about his first-hand experience with aphasia and learn how to interact with sufferers of the condition. Email Sean via sobee@optusnet.com.au to ask about him speaking at your club or district.

"For the first few weeks, I didn't have a clue what was happening. I was tired, I couldn't talk or hear, and I lost memory of numbers, some names and what do to with things like deodorant. It was a difficult time for my family as well, as we tried to understand what aphasia was," Sean said.

What followed was months of rehabilitation, but when he could Sean returned to Rotary, only to realise that no one knew what aphasia was or how to interact with someone with the condition. Through his speech pathologist, Colleen Kerr, Sean connected with fellow Rotarians and aphasia sufferers, Diane Finch and Bernard Chandra, and established The Aphasia Awareness Delegation, or TAAD, in 2015.

Sean has spent the past four years raising awareness about the condition through speaking at events and conferences, which Colleen says is remarkable, but not surprising, knowing Sean's personality.

"Sean has come such a long way.

He's gone from saying two words to getting up and presenting to rooms full of people. He will continue to improve, but aphasia is permanent; Sean will always have language challenges," Colleen said.

Using gestures or alternative words to communicate his message, Sean educates on how to interact with people who have speech issues through practical advice. And he's already reached thousands of people through speaking at Rotary clubs around Sydney and presenting at the National Brain Injury Conference and Australian Aphasia Conference.

With over 80,000 Australians living with aphasia, Sean hopes to continue raising awareness, with a long-term goal of taking TAAD national.

For more information on aphasia, visit the Australian Aphasia Association at aphasia.org.au or the Aphasia New Zealand Charitable Trust at www.aphasia.org.nz.