

'The King's Speech': good drama - but accurate science?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- "The King's Speech" is a compelling enough story to merit 12 Oscar nominations. (We'll find out how compelling when the Academy Awards are announced Feb. 27). However, as contentions surface about the film's historical accuracy (Lionel Logue's grandson said his grandfather would never call the King of England "Bertie," and the real-life Churchill, contrary to the film's portrayal, staunchly opposed Edward VIII's abdication), what about the film's depiction of stuttering and Logue's therapy techniques? Did the film portray them accurately?

"While stuttering and its treatment have been documented for hundreds of years, systematic development of effective treatment methods didn't really emerge until the late 1940s," said Doug Cross, associate professor of speech-language pathology and audiology at Ithaca College. "As depicted in the film, stuttering has been treated by using every technique you can imagine, from putting stones in the mouth to signing speech to physical relaxation. In that sense, the movie accurately portrayed the myriad of techniques available at the time, especially for an untrained speech pathologist such as Logue. An impressive part of the film was the way it accurately depicted the important relationship between the mechanical and psychological aspects of speech and stuttering. As much as the field has evolved and specialized since Lionel Logue's day, most speech-language pathologists agree that focus on integrating the perceptions and emotions that clients experience about themselves and their speech problems with effectively modified mechanics of coordinated speech is an important aspect of treatment."

Chief among those emotions is fear.

“Fear does not cause stuttering,” Cross said. “The roots of stuttering are complex and multidimensional, but anxiety and fear about becoming stuck on sounds and words and the stigma society often places on stuttering behavior play significant roles in the development and perpetuation of the problem. The more the person tries to hide, prevent or rapidly escape stuttering, the worse the problem becomes, creating a negative cycle of anticipation and struggle. This type of negative anxiety about performance and recovery from mistakes affects stuttering much in the same way it affects many other behaviors we experience in life.”

As it did with George VI, stuttering usually starts between two and six years of age. However, in many cases up to age 12, sufferers experience spontaneous recovery. After 12, though, the chances of spontaneous recovery dramatically decrease.

“Since Lionel Logue’s day, we’ve developed more effective protocols for treating stuttering and its impact on effective communication,” Cross said. “Advances in science and technology, such as brain studies and DNA analysis, tell us about the effects of neuromotor systems on speech patterns; still, there’s no silver bullet to treating stuttering, and there is no cure. I think it would be inappropriate for a speech pathologist to say, ‘We’ve cured stuttering.’ Its causes are much too complex. This concept eventually comes out in the film.”

However, contemporary speech pathologists can help stutterers find their voices, either by designing different methods of speaking that would prevent stuttering or by reducing the [stutter](#) to the point where it is no longer a distraction.

“Stuttering is a communication problem that often makes both speakers and listeners extremely uncomfortable and anxious but at the same time

fascinates them,” Cross said. “I think that might explain why ‘The King’s Speech’ is making such an impact.”

Provided by Ithaca College

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