

# Care of the Professional

Voice begins with an impulse from the brain and is stimulated by an intention to speak or to sing. Voice is produced by a flow of air from the lungs setting the vocal cords in the larynx into vibration. The voice is then shaped into speech by the lips, tongue and palate in the mouth. However, voice is much more than a mechanical phenomenon. It is a mirror of personality, a carrier of moods and emotions, it is unique to an individual just like a fingerprint. For a teacher the voice is the 'tool of the trade' and a voice problem will impact negatively on work performance, emotional well being and self-confidence. Voice problems may result in dilution of teaching activities, frequent absences from the classroom and a career change. For these reasons the care of the teacher's voice is paramount.

## Why do Teachers get Voice Problems?

There is a considerable body of evidence to show that teachers are particularly at risk of developing voice problems, which impact on their work and personal life. As professional voice users the care of the voice is essential to the teachers' career. Teachers face a major challenge: how to be good facilitators of learning while overcoming the work-related hazards to good vocal performance. Some of which include talking for long periods of time, background noise, poor room acoustics, long speaking distance, dry and/or dusty air quality, poor working posture, stress and inadequate treatment of early signs of vocal difficulty. Some subjects, such as physical education are likely to put the voice more at risk than others and female voices are more vulnerable.

It is not just the vast amount of talking that teachers do, it is also the nature of the talking. Teachers are required to use

their voice to perform, explain, justify, intervene, negotiate, emote and repress all in a day's work. Primary school teachers especially are frequently exposed to infections, colds and sore throat from the children in the classroom. Upper respiratory infections impact negatively on the vocal cords and predispose teachers to hoarseness.

## Voice Symptoms in Teachers

Some or all of the following symptoms may be experienced – dryness and/or soreness of the

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throat, hoarseness, complete loss of voice, muscle aching in neck/throat, loss of singing voice, vocal fatigue after teaching. Studies have shown that more teachers than non-teachers present for voice therapy at speech and language therapy clinics. Some will experience intermittent problems, which coincide with term time and improve again during breaks from the vocal demands of teaching. Others will have persistent hoarseness with associated physical changes in the larynx, for example vocal cord nodules, polyps, oedema (swelling) and thickening of the vocal cords. For some teachers treatment may involve a combination of surgery to remove the vocal nodules and a 6-12 week course of voice therapy, others will require voice therapy as the sole treatment. Treatment of voice problems has financial and time implications for the individual teacher, the employer and the health service.

## Research

My work as a speech and language therapist in the field of

voice disorders has brought me into contact with many teachers with voice problems. As part of a Masters Degree, I carried out a controlled voice treatment study at the Mater Hospital this year with a group of 20 teachers from the Dublin area. The purpose of the research was to see if a group of teachers with self-reported voice problems benefited from a treatment program, which incorporated voice care advice and a practical exercise program called Vocal Function Exercises. The age

tant trends:

1. The majority of teachers who contacted me regarding the study were primary school teachers.
  2. The laryngeal examination, which was carried out on all teachers prior to treatment, showed that 50% had physical changes in their vocal cords. 30% of the group had vocal cord nodules.
- The level of interest in the voice study was greater than I had anticipated and, unfortunately, not all the teachers that contacted me could be accommodated in the study. Many teachers from all over Ireland contacted me by email, telling me about their voice difficulties. The following emails speak for themselves as a reflection of the significant problems that Irish teachers are experiencing.

- "I am currently experiencing problems with regaining my voice following a flu. This is a recurring problem and being a teacher I find it particularly frustrating. I have had no audible voice for six weeks now as it is too painful to talk..."
- "I've only been teaching for 18 months but I've already had a dose of pharyngitis and also a dose of tonsillitis..."
- "I have been having trouble with my voice for the last year. I have been to a consultant and he referred me to a speech therapist. She gave me a microphone to use in the classroom. My voice is very weak, like as if I was whispering. I have no volume at all. I also get very breathless. I was in a choir but had to give it up'. Are there many other people like me? It can be quite stressful in the classroom trying to make myself heard."
- "... while the situation improves during the holiday, as soon as term begins, things start to go downhill again, and are now so difficult that after 15 years of teaching I am seriously considering a career change, in order to avoid doing lasting damage to my voice".

# Voice

## Voice Training

During the study, I was interested to find out if the teachers had been given information and/or training in voice when they were training to be teachers. Most teachers hadn't received any formal information. The small number that had received it described the one-hour educational lecture as insufficient. When I asked the teachers what they felt was important to include in a voice care educational programme, the majority felt that training in breathing and voice projection were among the most important aspects to include.

It has been asserted in the literature that voice problems in teachers should be recognised as an occupational disease rather than an individual teacher's health problem. I feel that this change of focus would facilitate greater awareness of voice care among teachers, educators and employers, that it would result in greater support for teachers who have developed voice problems and most importantly that it would drive compulsory voice training for all teachers.

## Problem Solving

### Laryngitis/Throat Infection

If you lose your voice or have a sore throat accompanied by a rise in temperature.

#### Do:

- Rest your voice.
- Seek medical help.

#### But try to avoid:

- Strong throat sprays, lozenges, etc which can dry up vocal folds.
- Whispering.

- Singing if your voice is hoarse, strained or your throat is sore.
- However, if voice problems persist with:
- hoarseness for more than 2-3 weeks;
  - regular hoarseness or voice loss;
  - significant voice quality changes;
  - awareness of constant vocal fatigue;
  - difficulty of pain when swallowing.

Please ask your GP for a referral to an Ear Nose and Throat Consultant who can then, in turn, refer you to a Speech and Language Therapist for the appropriate help.

## Basic Voice Care Advice

Some handy hints to keep your voice strong and healthy.

#### Do:

- Warm up your voice before prolonged use by humming gently or doing some vocal exercises.
- Drink plenty of water/juice, small amounts at regular intervals throughout the day.
- Relax shoulders and neck.
- Breathe from the diaphragm.
- Be aware of posture when speaking – aim for ease in alignment of the body.
- Adjust the environment as much as possible to reduce background noise.
- Consider tone of voice.
- Use a lower pitch to gain children's attention, or other signals such as sound (clap) or visual (raised hand).
- Use silence to emphasise a point or get attention.
- Wait until the class is quiet

before speaking.

- Ensure that the environment is well humidified with plants or a bowl of water.
- Learn to be sensitive to the first sign of vocal fatigue.
- Take time off work if you have been diagnosed as having laryngitis.

#### Avoid:

- Smoking.
- Very hot foods and drinks which cause dehydration and strip mucus from the throat.
- Coughing, instead sip water or swallow gently but if you have to cough do so as gently as possible.
- Speaking over noise – consider how background noise can be eliminated or at least regulated.
- Shouting – be aware that children's voices are much higher pitched so avoid trying to raise your pitch over theirs to be heard.
- Raising your vocal volume or pitch over prolonged periods.
- Chalk or other types of dust or fumes.

- Stress – try to set aside some time for rest and relaxation!
- Singing if your voice is hoarse or strained, or your throat sore
- Excessive use of the telephone, especially if your voice feels strained.

## Useful sources of Information

1. Voice Care Network (UK) [www.voicecare.org.uk](http://www.voicecare.org.uk)
2. The Teaching Voice. Stephanie Martin and Lyn Darnley (1966). Whurr Publishers. London.

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