

Singing improves speech of people with Parkinson's, but more research needed

June 3 2016, by Euan Wemyss



Singing may have benefits for people with Parkinson's disease, according to a new review. Credit: University of Aberdeen

There is strong evidence that singing benefits the speech of people with Parkinson's disease, but more research needs to be carried out into the area, according to a review of studies led by researchers at the University of Aberdeen.

In collaboration with clinicians at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital and St Helier Hospital in London, the team conducted a [systematic review](#) of published evidence regarding the beneficial effects of [singing](#) for people with Parkinson's. The results have been published in the *Journal of Parkinson's Disease*.

They found that most studies supported the idea that singing helps the

[speech](#) of people with Parkinson's. They also found that more studies are required to assess whether this benefit can lead to functional communication as opposed to just physical speech features in people with Parkinson's disease.

They also concluded that a more thorough assessment needed to be carried out with regard to the impact on quality of life.

Lead researcher Dr Maxwell Barnish noted that, "this is a promising field, but one that requires more research if the maximum benefit is going to be harnessed".

Parkinson's and existing therapies

Parkinson's disease is a common, age-related neurodegenerative condition that affects over 120,000 people in the UK and continues to become more common. Treatment has traditionally focused on drugs. These have improved movement, but have had little impact on many other symptoms of Parkinson's and often have serious side effects.

Allied health services such as speech and language therapy may be beneficial, although evidence for many current techniques is not particularly strong.

In recent years, there has been interest in how performing arts, including singing, may be beneficial for people with conditions such as Parkinson's. Choirs for people with neurological conditions can now be found in many locations.

Singing provides great benefit to many people regardless of their health status. These benefits may be psychosocial as well as physical.

Systematic Review

The review aims to serve two purposes - to encourage further high-quality research into this area and to draw clinicians' attention to the therapeutic possibilities that singing offers.

Dr Barnish adds: "Singing might be an approach that speech and language therapists wish to explore using as part of their therapy and healthcare providers might wish to develop further partnerships with community-based performing arts organisations. These partnerships already exist in some localities and the benefits for the people involved and society are clear to see."

Sharing her personal experiences, investigator Susannah Barran from Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital in London, where she is a speech and language therapist and conducts a choir, said: "Singing provides a vital bolster for our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It's something we do naturally, without even realising it, when we're happy and it's often infectious. Our voices are instruments we can carry with us everywhere, to share with others, or to sing on our own, and that's empowering. Singing in groups can 'break the ice' - it helps us to feel a sense of belonging and feel less lonely."

Investigator Rachel Atkinson, an adult neurological specialist speech and language therapist at St Helier Hospital in London, added: "You only have to turn on your TV to learn about the potential benefits of choirs for more than just the singing these days. This review is greatly beneficial in highlighting the need for further research in this area and exploring readily accessible community singing groups as a source of support and therapeutic benefit for people with Parkinson's disease."

She adds: "This review reminds us as a profession to think outside the box and encourage community activities in addition to traditional clinic-

based therapy to facilitate broader social activity and participation for our client groups."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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