



Yvonne Wren

Research and Development Forum

As the Bristol Speech and Language Therapy Research Unit approaches its 30th anniversary, Dr Yvonne Wren and colleagues reflect on the achievements and impact it has made on the profession

Celebrating success

In the early 1990s, Professor Pam Enderby, then head of the speech and language therapy department at Frenchay Hospital in Bristol, was speaking to local SLTs in their annual study day.

Pam was talking about a recent clinical query regarding swallowing, explaining how the team had answered the question by spitting into tubes to measure the viscosity of saliva after drinking. Their discovery, that increased dairy intake resulted in thicker saliva, was a small finding with a big impact for patients with swallowing problems.

At that time, there was little research in response to clinical questions in this field and the Bristol Speech and Language Therapy Research Unit (BSLTRU), as it became known, was established in 1988 as an integral part of the clinical service to address practical therapy questions just like this.

Origins

The early days of BSLTRU had a focus on adults with acquired neurological disorders, then

publication of the Frenchay Dysarthria Assessment (1983) and the Frenchay Aphasia Screening Test (1986) led to an interest in applying new technologies to intervention. At the same time, Dr Brian Petheram from the University of the West of England's computer department joined the BSLTRU team, while funding from the Wolfson Foundation and the Stroke Association led to the formation of the Aphasia Computer Team in 1987. This laid the groundwork for the research unit and, with additional funding from The Underwood Trust, the new Speech Therapy Research Unit was opened by journalist Angela Rippon in 1988.

By the mid-1990s, the research unit had started to extend its interests to other client groups and funding was obtained to carry out research in the fields of stammering, AAC, primary speech and language difficulties, and speech sound disorder in children.

The success of the unit was recognised by the number of

grant awards obtained, in the appointment of Pam Enderby as a professor at The University of Sheffield, and funding for the appointment of Dr Sue Roulstone as co-director of the unit.

Current overview

BSLTRU's aim has always been to conduct research to improve the care and management of people with speech, language and communication disorders by developing knowledge related to the prevention, management and social consequences of the disorders.

Now hosted by North Bristol NHS Trust, the unit is situated at Southmead Hospital with a team comprising SLTs and psychology and information systems researchers with specialisms in developmental language disorder, speech sound disorder, cleft palate, AAC, head and neck cancer, and stuttering.

Funded predominantly by grants and charitable donations, recent research at the unit has focused on a range of topics within speech and language therapy, including:

- assessments, outcome measures and screening tools;
- perceptions of communication disorders and therapy;
- therapists' decision making;
- therapy development and evaluations; and
- development and evaluation of software for those with speech and language disorders.

Future

Over the last 30 years, BSLTRU has successfully supported 20 PhD students, carried out clinically applied research, published numerous papers, and been successful in competitive and commissioned research bids. The team has sat on several RCSLT committees and both Professors Pam Enderby and Sue Roulstone have spent time in the role of RCSLT Chair. The unit has also hosted visits from esteemed international academics in the field including (most recently) Professor Lawrence Shriberg from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Professor Sharynne McLeod from Charles Sturt University in Australia. In the autumn, Professors Barbara May

Bernhardt and Joe Stemberger from the University of British Columbia, Canada, will also be visiting to speak on speech development in multilingual children.

Now directed by Dr Yvonne Wren (an SLT who was in the audience listening to stories of spitting therapists in the early 1990s), the unit is seeking to inspire the next generation of clinical academics. In that capacity, BSLTRU maintains its original desire to make a difference – to individuals with communication difficulties and their families, and to those of us who work with them. We might not be looking at spit quite so much these days, but the questions that drive our activity remain those clinical queries that drive all SLTs. ■

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(L-R) Brian Petheram, Sam Harding, Pam Enderby, Yvonne Wren, Kath Broomfield, Sue Roulstone, Rosemarie Hayhow, Fay Smith and Lydia Morgan at the BSLTRU.

Table 1. Overview of BSLTRU projects and impacts over the last 30 years

Key Projects	People	Impact
Randomised controlled trial of speech and language therapy for aphasia	Rachel David Pam Enderby	One of the earliest randomised controlled trials investigating the impact of speech and language therapy on aphasia following stroke.
Frenchay Aphasia Screening Test	Pam Enderby	Translated into many languages.
Frenchay Dysarthria Assessment	Pam Enderby	One of a few standardised dysarthria assessments; translated into several languages.
Therapy Outcome Measures (TOMs)	Pam Enderby, Brian Petheram, Alex John	Now used as part of the RCSLT Outcomes project.
INTACT	Brian Petheram, Jane Mortley	Pre-cursor to the Step by Step software used in the Big CACTUS trial.
Bristol Stammering Research Project	Anne-Marie Cray, Rosemarie Hayhow	Produced review of the literature on stammering research and an analysis of the experiences of stammering and therapy by those who stammer.
STEP study (speech and language therapy effectiveness with pre-school children)	Sue Roulstone, Margaret Glogowska	Published in <i>The BMJ</i> , this study showed that children typically received six hours of intervention in a year, which was insufficient to see a significant change compared to the watchful waiting group.
PCAD (personal communication aid for dysphasia)	Phillipa Hardy, Alex Davies	Set up to address the needs of the dysphasic population by designing a portable communication aid specifically for people with dysphasia.
Lidcombe in the Community study	Rosemarie Hayhow	Explored parents' and clinicians' experiences of the Lidcombe Programme in the UK.
Health Technology Devices grant from the Department for Health with GL Assessment	Yvonne Wren, Sue Roulstone	Led to the development and validation of the Phoneme Factory Software and book series.
MRC Research Project grant	Sue Roulstone, Yvonne Wren	Funded research using the ALSPAC (Avon longitudinal study of parents and children) dataset and identified prevalence and risk factors that can be used to identify children at risk for persistent speech disorder.
BUPA Funding	Rosemarie Hayhow, Sue Roulstone	Funded investigation into prevalence and risk factors for stammering in the ALSPAC cohort.
Bercow Review	Sue Roulstone, Anne Ayre	Working with colleagues, this ground-breaking review has been pivotal in the debate around provision for children with SLCN.
Better Communication Research Programme	Sue Roulstone, Yvonne Wren, Rosemarie Hayhow, Helen Hamby	With collaborators, this work formed the basis of the What Works database. It also reported on the preferred outcomes of children with SLCN and their parents.
Underwood Trust Endowment	Sue Roulstone	This endowment supported a professorial role for the Director of BSLTRU.
NIHR Programme Grant	Sue Roulstone, Yvonne Wren	This study used the Phoneme Factory Sound Sorter software in a cluster randomised controlled study in Australia.
NIHR Fellowships	Yvonne Wren (Postdoc), Lucy Southby, Kath Broomfield, Sam Burr (Doctoral), Anna Prince (MClinRes)	These schemes helped to fund research proposals and training for SLTs interested in a research career.
HEE/Internships	Hannah Lane, Sarah Overton	This scheme has provided clinical SLTs with experience of research and an opportunity to consider a clinical academic career.