Maintaining the art of conversation in Parkinson’s disease

Conversation has been described as ‘a vocal competition in which the one who is catching his breath is called the listener’ (Anon.). The competition is hardly fair for people with Parkinson’s disease (PD) who are inevitably relegated to the listening role by their hesitant, hypophonic speech.

Relationships are forged from social interaction, but patients with PD are limited by the dual effects of poor verbal and non-verbal communication compounded by impairment of semantic processing affecting complex sentence comprehension [1].

Academic research can sometimes lose sight of the human context, and the literature on speech in PD has largely concentrated on detailed dissection and description of the various impairments in phonation, articulation, acoustic perception and timing, which characterise PD speech [2–4].

In contrast, the article by Miller et al. is notable for examining communication from the perspective of the impact on the individual and sheds some light on the inward spiral of social withdrawal that so often accompanies the downward spiral of disease progression in PD [5]. Themes that emerged from in-depth interviews highlight the demoralising effect of losing track mid-sentence, the impact on self-perception and timing, which characterise PD speech [2–4].

What are the lessons for the clinicians?

Speech encompasses much more than simple intelligibility. Take account of subtle difficulties with self-expression including cognitive and language difficulties; keep it simple and write things down. Health professionals also have a responsibility to help carers, and patients develop constructive coping strategies based on an understanding of the effects of PD on verbal and non-verbal self-expression.

Communication is central to every patient encounter but, to quote George Bernard Shaw, ‘the greatest problem with communication is the illusion it has been accomplished’. Perhaps a useful starting point is to routinely ask ‘have you anything else you want to say?’—and then to listen.

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References