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Stroke effects linger

Aphasia impairs woman's ability to use and comprehend words

By Paul Swiech

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BLOOMINGTON — For years, Nancy Hyatt, 56, did what most of us take for granted. She filtered through noises at large gatherings to focus on what one person was saying.

She comprehended what someone was telling her, while considering her response.

She spoke without hesitation and chose appropriate words.

She read a lot.

Those skills served the Bloomington woman well as a paralegal with a Clinton law firm and as a mother of two children.

Everything changed on April 1, 2004, when a stroke resulted in global aphasia.

Aphasia is an impairment of the ability to use or comprehend words, usually because of a stroke or other brain injury, according to the National Aphasia Association.

Global aphasia meant Nancy couldn't understand, talk or read.

She has relearned much of that. But it hasn't been easy and she wants to progress further.

"It's so difficult," she said in her Bloomington home recently. "Your brain is different now."

But Nancy agreed to tell her story to recognize those who helped in her recovery and to give hope to others with aphasia.



Nancy Hyatt read slowly from "The Secret Life of Bees" along with a recording of the book on an 8-track tape, as her sister, Shirley Hyatt, looks on. Nancy slowed the recording to assist her comprehension.

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"When you say 'aphasia,' most people don't know what you're talking about," she said slowly, making sure she chose the correct words.

Ignorance about aphasia isolates patients who already are frustrated because of their difficulties with comprehension and speech.

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STROKE

"People think we're mentally ill and we're not smart," she said. "That can be very difficult."

An irony is aphasia is more common than some better-known brain disorders, such as Parkinson's disease, according to the association. An estimated one million Americans have aphasia.

Nancy wants to assist herself and other Central Illinois residents with aphasia by helping organize a local aphasia support group. Members can exchange ideas, support each other and educate others about their condition.

Nancy is a Cleveland native who moved to Bloomington-Normal in 1987 with her children, Andy and Ali, so she could attend Illinois State University. After graduation, she went to work as a paralegal with the Moss, Bryan & Moss law firm in Clinton.

In February 2004, she went to her ophthalmologist, Dr. Catharine Crockett, who noticed a problem with Nancy's left eye. She sent Nancy for an MRI, which showed that the problem was an aneurysm, a swelling of an artery wall in the left frontal lobe of her brain.

A neurosurgeon told Nancy that the aneurysm needed to be clipped or coiled, because if it burst it could be fatal. He also told her of the risks of surgery. Nancy decided to go ahead with surgery, which took place April 1.

Nancy remembers nothing of the next week.

Her sister, Shirley Hyatt, 54,

of Columbus, Ohio, said the neurosurgeon told her later that "when he got in there, the aneurysm was bigger and of a more complex shape than he originally thought." It wrapped around the artery rather than just bulging on one side.

To clip the aneurysm, he had to stop blood flow to that part of the brain for 10 minutes to prevent hemorrhaging, Shirley said.

"This was not malpractice on his part or the anesthesiologist's," Shirley said.

The aneurysm was clipped and Nancy's life was saved. But 10 minutes without oxygen or blood flow to that part of the brain had its price. She couldn't speak, comprehend or read.

The next thing Nancy remembers is speech and occupational therapists working with her the second week after the surgery.

"Physically, I got stronger. But I was still pretty mixed up." Family and friends would talk with her but she couldn't understand what they were saying.

Lack of understanding and loss of control led to suspicions, Shirley recalled.

"You didn't know how you got there (the hospital)," Shirley told her sister. "I remember you feeling bewildered and fearful and wondering why everyone (medical professionals) was around you."

Nancy said, "With aphasia, you get depressed and angry and all of that bothers your brain."

With hard work by her and medical professionals such as speech pathologist Nancy Anderson of BroMenn Regional Medical Center, Nancy Hyatt was able to improve her comprehension, her speech and her

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Understanding aphasia's challenges

By Paul Swiech
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BLOOMINGTON — While Nancy Hyatt's comprehension, speech and reading have improved, she still has challenges. Illustrating them may help understand aphasia:

Understanding her own speech

At one point during The Pantagraph interview, she said she had one grandchild.

"You have two grandchildren," corrected her sister, Shirley.

"What did I say?" asked Nancy, who thought she had said "two."

Struggling for the right word

Several times during the interview, she stopped speaking to try to say the correct word.

"I'm hearing the word but I'm not hearing the word," she tried to explain.

Several times, she struggled for an appropriate verb. Other times, she began words but needed Shirley's assistance to help her finish: "sun" for "sunflower," "ac" for "acrylic," "De" for "December."

Struggling for the correct word increases under stress. Last year, she was rushed to the emergency room because of kidney stones and couldn't answer a question about her insurance, Shirley recalled.

Filtering out noise

In a loud environment — such as a restaurant — Nancy has trouble filtering out music, cell phone rings, and other conversation to focus on the talk around her table.

"Other things are distracting and it's a jumble of noise. I can't understand what people are saying. If I can ask them to repeat, that will help. If it's too much, I just be quiet and smile."

For that reason, she avoids large groups.

Processing conversations

Nancy has trouble comprehending what she's hearing, while framing her response at the same time.

"I did that my whole life," she said. Now it's hard to do both at the same time. I can hear you talking, but what I'm hearing may be what I'm thinking. I have to say 'Stop thinking about this, Nancy. Think about what he is saying.' " Then she can think about her response.

That's why answering a cashier's question at the supermarket and talking with someone on the phone are difficult.

"I tell people, 'I'm sorry, I have a stroke. Could you please repeat this again?' because they don't understand what aphasia is."

Reading

"I love reading but I could barely read anything since aphasia. A short story would take me a week" because she'd have to stop to figure out the meaning of so many words.

Nancy subscribes to a Library of Congress program for aphasia patients. The program has books on eight-track tapes that may be slowed down to assist comprehension. Nancy reads books while playing the recordings.

"Now I'm reading my first adult book since surgery: 'The Secret Life of Bees.' It's good to be able to do this again."

While tiring at first, she hung in there. In addition to therapy, the program offered social interaction with other patients.

"We spoke a lot," she recalled. That helped her speech and comprehension — and her confidence.

Most of all, Nancy appreciated communicating with others with aphasia.

"I had never met one other person with aphasia," she recalled. "I was thrilled to meet others because we could talk and write to each other and give each other support and ask how you handle certain things."

In addition to her six-week session in Ann Arbor in November and December 2004, Nancy attended a two-week session last January, a six-week session in February and March, and a 12-week session from August to Nov. 4.

Each time, she improved her comprehension, speech and language. Each time, she needed to get approval from her insurance company, which agreed to cover the cost. Nancy's total monetary responsibility amounted to \$4,500.

Between sessions, Nancy was back in Bloomington-Normal, getting speech therapy at the ISU Speech & Hearing Clinic and volunteering at ISU's Miller Library.

In addition to the support group, Nancy hopes to find a job through the Illinois Division of Rehabilitation Services.

"I want people to know about aphasia. I want people with aphasia to be out talking instead of just sitting quietly."

reading enough to be sent home.

But more therapy was needed. A Web search by Shirley identified the University of Michigan Residential Aphasia Program, which touts itself as North America's oldest and most effective residential pro-

gram for aphasia treatment.

Nancy was interested and her insurance agreed to cover the \$25,000 cost for six weeks of therapy, with Nancy responsible for \$500.

She was accepted in July and put on a waiting list. In Novem-

ber 2004, she began the six-week program in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Nancy and other aphasia patients were in intensive group or individual speech therapy for 23 hours a week. They were given homework assignments, such as reading a newspaper ar-

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