


Please cite the Published Version

Butt, Ayesha  and Quaye, Michelle (2023) Speech and Language Therapy, The Judicial System and Pakistan. Foundation University Journal of Rehabilitation Sciences, 3 (2). pp. 36-37. ISSN 2709-5134

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33897/fujrs.v3i2.358>

Publisher: Foundation University

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an open access editorial for Foundation University Journal of Rehabilitation Sciences (FUJRS), Volume 3, Number 2 (July 2023)

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Speech and language therapy, The Judicial System and Pakistan

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Speech and language therapists play a critical role in facilitating and enabling effective communication. This should transcend beyond the background of the client. However, to date there has been no evidence of any therapeutic facilities established for young offenders or within the judicial system in Pakistan. Internationally, a significant population namely 60% of the young population in the judicial system is deemed to have speech and language difficulties.(1)

There remains a pressing need to address the challenges faced by these marginalised individuals who may present with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) that remain unassessed and untreated. Young offenders (YO) present with significant communication difficulties in comparison to their peers.(2) Accumulative research also indicates that individuals with SLCN are also more likely to engage in repeated crime (recidivism).(3) Minimal or inconsistent access to education and difficulties with literacy further contribute to risks of offending.(4) From a safeguarding perspective, communication difficulties associated with SLCN are more likely to lead to increased vulnerability in conditions of heightened stress or risk, such as conflict, harm and crime.(5)

Speech, language and communication needs are not only extremely complex, but they are also incredibly vast in their presentation. These difficulties could manifest themselves in many ways such as difficulties with reception and/or expression. The variability in SLCN presentation can also impact on comprehensive identification in earlier life. Inadequate speech and language skills can result in a breakdown in communication at any stage, such as the inability to comprehend legal terms and proceedings,(6) to process information, they may be perceived as willingly non-compliant by misinterpretation or to be able to adequately express

their opinions, which impacts on the individual's ability to exercise their basic rights and in turn to seek justice.(7,8)

Addressing the challenges:

There are no published, accessible, culturally and linguistically apt standardized assessments available in Pakistan. This results in the inability to provide evidence-based assessment findings to support claims of SLCN. The provision of indigenous assessments is paramount.

There is a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding SLCN in school teachers which impacts on early identification in Pakistan. If these issues are addressed at an early stage and support is made available, this could contribute to curtailing the high prevalence of adolescents and young adults engaging in high-risk criminal activity and entering the criminal justice system.(3)

Non-existent specialised training for police, lawyers and other professionals involved in the judicial system regarding SLCN awareness is a barrier to acceptance of these difficulties. Fostering collaboration between clinicians, legal professionals, and relevant government bodies is essential. This collaboration can help formulate attitudes, guidelines and standards for accommodating individuals with SLCN within the judicial system. Additionally, in judicial settings, the legal terminology used by professionals to conduct witness statements, sentencing and beyond can be unfamiliar to YO, which can further exacerbate adverse interactions with professionals. Young people with SLCN may present with difficulties in retelling past events (narrative skills), which could render them vulnerable to not clarifying important points or not giving an accurate overview of their perspectives, therefore impacting on accuracy of statements.(9)

There is no provision for rehabilitation within the judicial system, particularly speech and language therapy in Pakistan. There is a growing need for identification of individuals with conditions such as autism or other learning disabilities, which may remain unidentified. An additional incorporation of vicarious or

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33897/fujrs.v3i2.358>

How to Cite: Butt AK, Quaye M. Speech and Language Therapy, The Judicial System and Pakistan. 2023 July;3(2):36-37

collaborative learning on an international level may deem beneficial for enhanced service delivery with this particular demographic.

The SLT profession is predominantly a female led profession around the world. This is a further barrier to SLCN support anecdotally, as female professionals in Pakistan have often been reported feeling uncomfortable working in such an environment or specifically influenced by their families to refrain from engaging with judicial service user groups. Speech therapy curriculum, course content and clinical placements do not address and include information on YO and the judicial system, which should be introduced to the profession in Pakistan. It is also crucial to raise awareness among the public, dispelling misconceptions surrounding SLCN, providing more insight to the links between SLCN and youth offending as well as promoting inclusivity.

Conclusion:

The integration of speech therapy services within Pakistan's judicial system is not only a matter of accessibility but also a fundamental issue of human rights and justice. By recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by individuals with SLCN, we can ensure that every citizen has equal opportunities and their rights are addressed. A comprehensive and collaborative effort between the speech therapy community, legal professionals, and policymakers is imperative to foster a more inclusive and just judicial system in Pakistan. It is paramount that timely assessments, therapy sessions, and counselling are provided to ensure individuals with SLCN receive the necessary support they require. Communication is a basic human right and organisations should be prioritising ways to accommodate all backgrounds and abilities in order to ensure beneficial outcomes. The neglect towards these young offenders and their basic human rights must stop and further proactivity towards preventative and supportive measures should continue to increase.

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