

 HOW DO I BECOME ...

A SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST

SPEECH-LANGUAGE pathologist Jennifer Eileen Peters found her calling when she was an A-level student in England some 20 years ago.

"In England, students are given opportunities to observe diverse professions before they decide which course to pursue.

"I had the privilege of seeing a speech-language pathologist work with a child. I have always wanted to work with kids and thought speech-language pathology was perfect for me."

The job of a speech-language pathologist is to bring a person's speech or language skills up to the level of his peers.

He or she works with children — normal as well as those with special needs — and adults, who have suffered speech impairment caused by a cleft palate, an accident or a stroke, to communicate better with others.

However, Peters almost changed her mind when she discovered how gruelling her course at the University of Reading, United Kingdom was.

"It was tough. I had to sit for 36 hours of lectures a week," recalls Peters.

Biology was a requirement.

"We studied the anatomy and physiology of breathing, which affects

speech, extensively," she says.

Apart from that, Peters also studied psychology, language and linguistics.

There was a point when Peters wanted to call it quits but followed her parents' advice to stick to the course.

She even went on to work at a hospital in the UK for two years after graduation. Peters returned to Malaysia 15 years ago to set up her own private practice.

Then, Peters was one of five specialists in the area. The number has grown about 10 times since.

There is still a huge demand for speech-language pathologists in Malaysia, she says.

"Recent statistics indicate that we need about 5,000 more speech-language pathologists.

As a speech-language pathologist who works on her own, Peters see her clients on an appointment basis.

"I work mainly with children. I would spend about 45 minutes with the child and his or her parent.

"I like to include the parent so that he or she would be able to see and understand what I do with the child.

"Children, whose parents are involved in the process, tend to show better progress.

"I spend another five to 10 minutes

alone with the parents to give them speech exercises to do at home with their child until the next appointment.

Those who wish to pursue her field should shadow a speech-language pathologist at a public hospital.

"Anyone who wants to pursue this area should have at least three years of experience working in a public hospital.

"That is where the exposure is," she says.

To be a speech-language pathologist, proficiency in a particular language is crucial "as you need to assess the patient in that language".

One must also be a people person and patient.

"Those with speech-impairment often feel frustrated because of their condition. So, they come to you with a lot of emotions."

But it is a highly rewarding job, says Peters, "when you see improvement in a patient's condition". — By

SUZIEANA UDA NAGU

Peters has written a book entitled *Making Chatter Matter — Understanding Language Impairment Within a Multilingual Environment*.

This is a fortnightly column.

