

KEEP THE WORLD TALKING

We meet *Professor Martin Birchall* to find out more about his innovative voice clinic at The Wellington Hospital

The voice is the principal mode of human communication and, as such, is the foundation of successful social interaction and business. The voice links us to people next to us or far away, and each voice is unique to each person.

Despite the increasing reliance of the modern world on information technology, tele-conferencing, internet calling and voice-activated software mean that maintenance of a normal voice will remain a critical means of professional and social success indefinitely.

Those who depend on their voices the most, however, are also those who are most prone to disorders (known as dysphonia) – over a million people each year in the UK alone. Most of these people have little knowledge of how to prevent dysphonia, or where to go when they develop problems.

Voice problems may start with coughs and colds; by misuse or overuse of the voice; by lifestyle effects, such as reflux; or rarer problems such as nodules, warts (papillomas), disorders of nerves and muscles, or throat cancer. Some problems may simply be due to a reaction of the body to stress.

However, even excellent family practitioners find it difficult to manage these conditions without specialist experience, imaging equipment and a wide range of treatment options.

To combat the problem, clinics run by specialists such as Professor Birchall's have particular relevance in the modern world, and are crucial to keeping the world talking.

"There are a number of important warning signs that tell you there is a problem with your voice," says Martin. "Hoarseness, harshness or breathiness may develop, or the pitch of the voice may change. If you sing, you may have a more restricted vocal range than you used to. The throat may feel sore

and conscious effort may be required to talk. Some people develop a dry chronic cough. You may find a lot of mucus in the throat, or you may have to clear your throat embarrassingly often.

"We find that many people have suffered with these problems for quite a while before they go and see their doctor, and that it can then be much longer before they are finally referred to a specialist. During this time they may have difficulty living and working properly.

"A big advantage that we have in our clinic is the close collaboration between a laryngologist and a voice therapist, combined when required with input from a top singing teacher, which speeds diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation in a way that working in isolation cannot."

Professor Birchall is constantly researching the boundaries of voice and throat care. This means he can bring the very best of modern knowledge to bear on individuals, returning them to life and work as smoothly as possible.

For more information or to make an appointment with Professor Birchall, call the Wellington Hospital Enquiry Helpline on 020 7483 5148 or visit www.thewellingtonhospital.com

TOP TEN TIPS FOR A HEALTHY VOICE

- Smokers should try to quit smoking, and non-smokers avoid smoky atmospheres as it is a powerful laryngeal irritant and the main cause of laryngeal cancer
- Drink a litre and a half of water or clear fluids every day
- Limit your intake of caffeine or alcohol, which dries the throat and increases reflux
- Spicy foods also increase reflux and irritation, so eat these earlier in the evening
- Home humidifiers help if you are prone to losing your voice
- Avoid using the voice intensively if you have a cold or flu
- Don't talk too much in noisy places
- Cradling the phone between the shoulder and head causes muscle tension, affecting the voice and throat
- If you talk to groups or teach, try using a microphone and amplifier system to reduce strain
- A voice (specialist speech and language) therapist can help you decide which patterns, pitch and breathing rhythms are best for you

MEET THE EXPERT

Professor Martin Birchall is one of the leading voice box specialists (laryngologists) in the world. Qualifying from Cambridge, he trained in London, Australia and the US. Due to his research-based approach to innovation and quality in patient care, he is one of the most sought-after speakers for international conferences on voice care. With expert voice therapists and singing teachers, he has set up a unique multidisciplinary private voice clinic, using state-of-the-art techniques in the modern setting of London's Wellington Hospital.

