

This year marks Australia's 20th anniversary of the Botox treatment program for Spasmodic Dysphonia, a rare neurological voice disorder. The treatment was initiated in Australia by the Neurophysiology Department at St Vincent's Hospital in 1991.

Addressing an assembly of primary school students at North Rocks in July 1987, teacher, Greg Partington's voice cracked. In the previous 12 months Greg had experienced symptoms of laryngitis and was told by people that his voice sounded funny. Well aware of the croakiness, Greg was referred to an ear, nose and throat specialist. Diagnosed with Spasmodic Dysphonia, Greg was told there was no cure for the rare neurological voice disorder.

Spasmodic Dysphonia is the inappropriate movement of the muscles of the larynx during activities such as speaking. Over activity of the muscles causes excessive closure or opening of the vocal cords which affects the voice. Although there is no cure, effective treatment is available and Greg was referred for speech therapy at Royal North Shore Hospital. Working with Helen Brake, now Manager of the Speech Pathology Department at St Vincent's Hospital, Greg resorted to voice exercises.

Meanwhile Drs Jeff Blackie and Paul Darveniza travelled to Europe to learn of a new Botulinum toxin treatment for Spasmodic Dysphonia. Returning to Australia, the duo was in search of a suitable patient to undergo the treatment and in April 1991 Greg was the first Australian to receive an injection of Botulinum toxin for Spasmodic Dysphonia. In a room off the Emergency Department at St Vincent's Hospital, Botulinum toxin was injected into Greg's vocal muscles.

What is Voice?

Voice is the sound made in the larynx by the vibration of the vocal cords. It conveys information through speech, song or emotional sounds such as laughing, crying and wailing. Unique as a finger print, the voice is used to inform, persuade and connect with people.

Nurses, doctors and other health professionals put great demands on their voices. As a result, they may experience voice problems, some of which can be avoided. If you notice that your voice has become hoarse or weak, you are losing your voice frequently or your throat is tired or sore after a day at work, contact the Speech Pathology Department for advice.

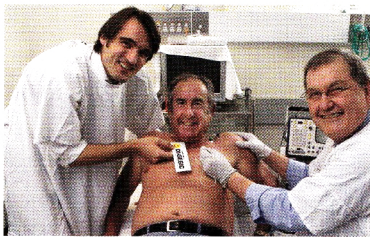
Known to weaken the over active muscles of the larynx which cause interruptions to the voice, the treatment relaxes the muscles to reduce spasms and improve speech.

Greg explains, "I had been the guinea pig for a few things so the thought of the treatment did not worry me."

On leave for two years, Greg was able to return to work after his first Botulinum toxin treatment in 1991 and returned to full time teaching in 1995, albeit in a different capacity. He retired from the NSW teaching service in January this year.

Since 1991 Greg has undergone the treatment every four to five months. He adds, "Before 1991 there was no medical intervention available in Australia. My voice was very hoarse and raspy and I could not teach anymore."

Today 20 years on, Greg continues to benefit from the introduction of the Botox treatment program for Spasmodic Dysphonia. Although not cured, the treatment which is administered within minutes enables Greg's voice to return to normal – allowing Greg to forget about his condition and live life to the fullest.



Greg Partington (centre) with Drs Stephen Tisch (left) and Paul Darveniza (right)

The celebration of World Voice Day in 2011, which aims to make people more aware of their voice and how to take care of it, coincides with the 20th anniversary of Australia's first Botulinum toxin treatment for Spasmodic Dysphonia, which was administered at St Vincent's Hospital.

The Speech Pathology Department at St Vincent's Hospital thanks the wider hospital community for its support in raising funds to upgrade the Voice Laboratory. The resulting purchase of equipment has enabled the department to provide the highest quality assessment and treatment for patients.