

Chancellor Jeffrey P. Gold, MD: Hello, I'm Dr. Jeff Gold, and welcome to another episode of "Heart to Heart." This is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, and we're so pleased to be speaking with Ms. Sydney Norton, a speech language pathologist in the Department of Speech Language Pathology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center Munroe-Meyer Institute. Ms. Norton works at the RiteCare Clinic in Hastings, Nebraska, and she's been called by so many an angel. Ms. Norton, welcome and thank you so much for being with us today. Before we get started and talk about developmental disabilities and your role as a speech language pathologist, our audience is always interested in how you decided to pursue this career. Did you have a magic moment when you woke up, you know, in a cold sweat at four o'clock in the morning and said, "This is what I'm going to do?" Was there a role model or some life experience that really got you into this?

Sydney Norton, speech language pathologist: I don't know that I had an "Aha!" moment, but I grew up in the world of rehab. My mother started her own physical therapy practice here in Hastings, and so I grew up in a therapy gym, and so I always knew I wanted to work with people with disabilities. I remember being a young freshman at UNL and sitting in the Intro to Speech and Language Pathology class, and I just couldn't take enough notes. And I looked forward to that class every single week. I kept signing up for them, and had to break the news to my mom that I wanted to be a speech language pathologist instead of a physical therapist. But she was very happy for me.

Dr. Gold: So, she forgave you for that?

Norton: She did. She did. Yeah.

Dr. Gold: Well, I'm really glad that you did. So, our audience should know Sydney, that I'm speaking to you from Omaha, but you're in Hastings. And maybe you can describe how important it is to provide the services that you provide in parts of Nebraska other than just in Omaha or Lincoln.

Norton: Sure, yeah. In rural Nebraska, it can often be difficult for families to find specialized services, or they have to travel great distances in order to find those services. So, being able to provide that, at no cost with the Scottish Rite Masons and the Munroe-Meyer Institute, is truly a blessing. And we can sometimes cut the distance from having to travel so far from western Nebraska all the way to Omaha.

Dr. Gold: So, what's a day in the life of the speech language pathologist like? Tell our audience a little bit about what that really means. Because unless you've had an experience with a child or a relative or a sibling, you may not know.

Norton: It's a lot of fun. It's a fast-paced, never dull day. Every single day is different. And we always say we have the best job in the world because we get to play all day. And if we're doing our job really well, that's what it looks like. And the kids really don't know any different. So, we get the joy of meeting kids where they're at and going through the journey with parents, of getting a diagnosis and getting intervention. Sometimes we get to hear their first words, their first sounds, their first attempts at communication, and we get to experience that and go through that journey and also grief process with the families. So, it is a really exciting job. It's a really joyful job.

Dr. Gold: Having had family members that have needed the services of the type that you provide so wonderfully, I know that they go through periods of fear, not understanding, a lot of tears frequently. So how do you try to help the family through that?

Norton: I think knowledge is power. So, giving them time to grieve, time to come to acceptance -- but giving them the appropriate referrals and access to other professionals within our fields that may be able to help them work through some of those things is an essential part. And also just, there's a bit of counseling that comes with speech language pathology that isn't often talked about. And so being there for your patients and just being the one to listen and acknowledge their fears is a really important part of my job.

Dr. Gold: I certainly commend you for that, but that's part of all of our health professions jobs is to, it's not just about healing, but it's also about hope. And we balance that all the time. As we like to say here, it's care and caring, and we should never blur those two together. What types of medical problems do you deal with most frequently? What types of diagnoses, and how long would a typical child be under your care?

Norton: So, the types of patients that I typically see are children, ages birth to age 10, who either haven't started talking yet and we're not sure why, and they might get a motor speech diagnosis, like childhood apraxia of speech or severe phonological disorder. I also see children who have suspected or confirmed autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome -- really a lot of different genetic disorders that may be impacting their speech and language. And swallowing.

Dr. Gold: And does the process generally provide some improvement?

Norton: It does. It isn't often a quick fix. A lot of the children that come to our clinic are here for months, sometimes years. Sometimes they graduate from our clinic and go on to transitional services throughout their life. But we often say we get the joy of getting to see some of the firsts with working with early intervention. So.

Dr. Gold: Well, you talked a little earlier about the partnership with Scottish Rite, and the fact that that allows the RiteCare Clinics, as part of the Munroe-Meyer Institute, to deliver care at no cost to the families. Is that correct?

Norton: That is correct. The partnership that Munroe-Meyer Institute and the Scottish Rite Masons have created here in Nebraska is phenomenal. Currently, the patients that come to our four clinics here in Nebraska get services at no cost, no matter what the situation is. And that is really uncommon. And I will say, one of the best parts of my job, (is) because I get to say, "Hey, we get to help you and I'm not going to send you a bill," which is really exciting for a lot of parents who are going through a very stressful time in their life.

Dr. Gold: So, if there is one thing that you wanted our audience to know about developmental disabilities awareness, and particularly this month, when we should be celebrating it, of course, and recognizing it every month, but is the one message you'd like to share?

Norton: I think just a message of acceptance, of accepting children, accepting people with disabilities, for their unique interests, for who they are, and taking the time to really slow down and listen to what they have to say, whatever form of communication that may be, in order to learn and to develop with them.

Dr. Gold: I think that's good advice for all of us. On behalf of not only the med center and the state of Nebraska, but all of us in the future, when we celebrate this special Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, I just want to thank you for all that you do, and thank our audience for being with us today. Thank you.

Norton: Thank you.