

Betty Toomey is helping others learn to live again

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Port Arthur News, Port Arthur, TX

Posted: 12/12/04 - 09:19:58 pm CST

It's not always about speech and hearing. Sometimes it's about swallowing.

Betty Toomey is part of the excitement a new piece of equipment brings to local clients who must re-learn to swallow and eat solid foods.

Toomey is office administrator for Capland Center for Communication Disorders. Her smiling face has been greeting clients for nearly 20 years. Taking a humble attitude, she likes to let others tout Capland's services, but shows agency pride.

"We don't turn anyone away. As long as I've been here, we've never turned anyone away," she said.

"I've seen autistic children," Toomey said, and ticked off a long list of ailments the not-for-profit speech and hearing center has dealt with: Spina Bifida, cleft palate, head trauma, stroke patients and other concerns in children and adults.

With clients at heart, the staff has often had former patients come back and thank them for healing services.

"I've always enjoyed working here. This is a good atmosphere," Toomey said.

Tracee Fields, director of speech pathology, demonstrated Capland's new VitalStim therapy on Toomey, sticking wires around her throat area to show how electric impulses "jolt" the throat into swallowing. The system pulls the base of the tongue down so that clients swallow if "they want to or not," Fields said.

Imagine the discomfort of not swallowing. This is a reality for many stroke victims and patients with other ailments. If you can't eat, that's a nutrition situation that can become a real social setback.

"In our culture food is the quality of life," Fields said. "Not eating is a terrible thing.

Fields typically starts her sessions with clients struggling to swallow ice chips. In later sessions they attempt consecutively harder foods. A man had worked his way up to a can of Pepsi and a Little Debbie, and ground meat is on the way.

Port Arthur Noon Sertoma, Evening Sertoma, Auora Sertoma and Service League of Port Arthur are among groups that paid for the new equipment and training. Capland recently opened a satellite office in Beaumont at 2190 Eastex Freeway. For information on the therapy, call 983-1651.



Brian Vincent/Port Arthur News Betty Toomey, Capland Center office administrator, left, demonstrates a new swallow therapy treatment with Speech pathologist Tracee Fields.