Specialists at the Lions Voice Clinic help ensure the show will go on.

BY SUZY FRISCH

A well-known star is on tour and headed for the Twin Cities. She’s been hoarse for days and is worried about whether it’s safe to sing. Her manager calls the Lions Voice Clinic: “Can you work her in?”

It will be a high-stakes visit, and the otolaryngologists and speech-language pathologists at the University of Minnesota specialty clinic know a lot is riding on their diagnosis. Either the singer will get the all-clear and be able to perform or have to cancel her appearance for fear of permanently damaging her instrument.

The clinic’s staff get such calls all the time. “We like to be able to reassure someone that they are safe to sing. That’s the happiest scenario—if we can see that everything looks OK,” says clinic director Stephanie Misono, MD, MPH. “Sometimes we talk about possible treatments, and sometimes we have to recommend canceling performances, which we don’t do lightly.”

For nearly 25 years, the clinic has served touring performers and local vocalists and actors. The Minnesota Opera, Guthrie Theater and other arts organizations regularly send performers to the clinic. However, the bulk of its more than 4,500 annual office visits are for average people suffering from voice or upper airway issues—teachers, choir directors, lawyers and others who rely on their voices for work. “People get awestruck that we treat the person headlining at the Xcel Center or the Ordway, but we also want to help people who can’t sing at church or read with their kids,” says Deirdre (D.D.) Michael, PhD, a speech-language pathologist with a doctorate in voice science and clinic co-director.

A team approach

Physicians and speech-language pathologists treat patients as a team—a concept that was unique in the mid-1990s when otolaryngologist George Goding Jr., MD, and Michael started the clinic. They believed that patients who saw an otolaryngologist and speech pathologist together would benefit from better diagnoses and treatment plans. “By seeing patients together, we develop a multidisciplinary plan for the patient,” Goding says. In addition, patients can ask questions of both professionals and better understand their recommendations.

Goding explains that they’ve found patients are more likely to follow through with therapy when the speech pathologist is involved from the beginning and they’re able to form a relationship.

Patients come to the clinic with any number of problems. Some might have
muscle tension dysphonia, where the muscles around the larynx are out of balance, causing poor voice quality or problems such as cracking on high notes, the need to exert increased effort when speaking or singing, and vocal fatigue. Others may have polyps or cysts on their vocal folds, or vocal-fold hemorrhage, which can devastate the voice. Yet others may have swallowing disorders, breathing issues and chronic cough. Treatment might include antibiotics, medication to reduce acid reflux or steroids to decrease inflammation. Medical treatments are often paired with speech and voice therapy, either a one-time session or multiple sessions over several weeks or months. In some cases, Goding and Misono may recommend surgery for problems that don’t resolve with medication and/or speech therapy.

The clinic receives support from Lions 5M International Hearing Foundation, which has funded some of the advanced diagnostic equipment used for laryngeal imaging and visualizing vocal-fold vibration. The Lions have also generously supported many faculty and resident research studies.

Misono’s research, for example, is focused on improving diagnosis and management of voice problems. She is also exploring how psychological factors such as stress affect voice function, which is often an issue for the performing artists who come to the clinic.

One important characteristic of the clinic is that its physicians and speech pathologists have backgrounds in music. Misono is a classical violinist who trained at Juilliard. Lisa Butcher, a speech-language pathologist and vocologist, is a professional singer who has performed with the Minnesota Opera, Minnesota Orchestra and other groups. Goding has sung in choirs, and Michael is a lifelong singer who has taught voice for 40 years. With their musical inclinations, they empathize deeply with their patients’ voice troubles. Michael, for example, conquered her own vocal injury in the 1980s. “It’s really important that we can tell them we understand what it’s like to go out on stage in front of a thousand people and not know what sound is going to come out of your voice. We know how psychologically distressing that is. We can say ‘I get it, I’ve been there—now let’s help you walk the road to put yourself and your voice back together again.’”

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