

An Intelligent Way Forward

A Few Words From Our Chairman

Welcome to the 2025 Newsletter from the Dominic Barker Trust.

We continue to fund and support research into the causes and treatment of stammering. In this edition, you will read about the research that the Fund is supporting including Birtan Demirel's research at Oxford University and the development of his SpeechMate app to use with a smartphone. Those who have joined us for our quiz will have had the opportunity to meet Birtan and will know that he has become a true friend of the Trust.

You will also read about important research into the views of stammerers themselves, to find out what they believe should be the priorities for the research community and for the Trust, and you will read about our work with the NHS Stammering Network as well as Stammering Awareness Day.

As you will be aware, there is a huge amount of attention being given by the media and all quarters to Artificial Intelligence at the moment. The Trust has been actively involved in funding research into ways in which the latest AI technology can assist those with a stammer, as well as that which keenly encourages the involvement of stammerers themselves in shaping research and development.

We are enormously grateful for your continued support and interest and I do hope that you will find this Newsletter of interest.



Toby Kramers

RESEARCH SUPPORTED BY THE TRUST

A VERY PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON A PHD



Dr Birtan Demirel

Dr Birtan Demirel writes:

I developed a stammer when I was eight years old, and for a long time it shaped how I saw myself. Even raising my hand in class or asking a simple question took courage. I decided to make stammering the focus of my career, hoping one day to contribute to both science and to the lives of other people who shared this experience.

In 2025, I completed my doctorate in Experimental Psychology at Oxford University with the generous support of the Trust. Their belief in me not only made Oxford possible, but also gave me the chance to dedicate myself fully to research that is deeply personal. My thesis explored both the neural and psychological basis of stammering, and possible new ways to support fluency, from brain imaging studies to innovative method.

In my first year, the Trust invited me to give a speech at their fundraising gala in front of 100 people. I had never spoken to such a large audience, and my stammer is often at its worst in high-stakes situations. I accepted the invitation, but the thought that I might not even be able to finish a single sentence kept going around in my head. I came to the realisation that when I'm not in dialogue with someone my stammer almost completely disappears, and also that if I speak the exact same words at the same time as someone else, my speech is entirely fluent.

So, I thought, what if I recorded my own voice in advance and gave my speech while listening to it through headphones?

On the night, in my headphones was my own voice, which I followed word for word. There was no stutter. Almost without a single hesitation, I finished my speech in my natural tone. When it ended, I worried that people might think, 'He told us about his stammer, but he doesn't have one.' I also knew that the moment I removed my headphones, I would say goodbye to fluent speech - almost like a pair of glasses, when you put them on, the world becomes clear; when you take them off, it's blurry again. That experience later became part of my doctoral research and supported me in my presentations and teaching at Oxford in neurophysiology and behavioural neuroscience. I progressed from someone who once hesitated to raise his hand in class to a tutor teaching at the University of Oxford. Now, together with Prof. Tim Denison, a world-leading scientist who has done pioneering work in neurotechnology, and with the unwavering support of the Trust, I am working to refine this method and give hope to others who, like me, face difficulties in public speaking. Together we are researching ways to bring fluent speech into daily life without any assistive methods and to reduce social anxiety in people who stammer. For this we are using brain imaging techniques like MRI, fMRI, and MEG to examine what happens in the brain just milliseconds before a stammer occurs. If we can identify these biological markers, we aim to intervene at the right moment, using methods such as magnetic stimulation, to make speech fluent before it even begins. This could lead to new learning in the brain and, over time, fully natural fluency. With deepest gratitude to everyone who stands behind the science of stammering and the hope it brings.

Birtan Demirel, Ph.D. Postdoctoral Researcher Institute of Biomedical Engineering

SPEECHMATE: AN INCREDIBLE NEW DEVELOPMENT

Following the completion of his PhD, the Trust is funding Dr Birtan Demirel in his post-doctoral research study at Oxford University to build on his previous work, under the guidance of Prof Tim Denison of the Department of Biomechanical Engineering. Birtan is developing SpeechMate, an AI-driven fluency enhancer designed to eliminate stammering by leveraging the scientifically validated 'choral speech' effect he has written about above.

Birtan's research has demonstrated that synchronising speech with a computer-generated voice delivered through headphones reduces stammering to below 3% disfluent syllables, the clinical threshold for stammering. The SpeechMate app aims to generate AI-personalised voices tailored to each user, using wireless earphones and AR glasses to offer an accessible and scalable solution for stammer-free public speaking. The Trust funding is supporting AI model development, user testing and the validation of SpeechMate's impact on fluency, public speaking avoidance and anxiety.

In September 2025, at the 14th Oxford Stuttering and Cluttering Research Conference, Birtan successfully trialed the use of SpeechMate when presenting the findings of his PhD research. Additionally, his paper on the choral speech method has just been published in the Journal of Fluency Disorders. You can read the paper by following this link <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2025.106168>.



Dr Birtan Demirel using SpeechMate at a recent conference



SPREADING THE WORD ON INTERNATIONAL STAMMERING AWARENESS DAY

On International Stammering Awareness Day 2024, the NHS Stammering Network organised a lunchtime webinar open to all NHS staff, in order to spread awareness. They spread the word to all of the NHS Trusts and had well over 300 people accepting the invitation and over 100 people attending on the day. The session focused on the research around the latest neurological findings on stammering and on tips and strategies for how to better support colleagues, patients and the public who stammer. This all provided revealing insights and showcased positive stories of people who stammer and who have established successful careers in the NHS.

Stammering Pride flag at NHS Trust, October 2024

STAMMERING, WOMEN AND WORK

Dr Clare Butler, Senior Lecturer in Work and Employment at Newcastle University, continues to be funded by the Trust whilst finalising her research entitled 'Stammering, Women and Work'. Her research aims to better understand the experiences of women at work and thereby improve the working lives of women who stammer.

Clare has presented the ideas that emerged from her early work, which was reported in our last newsletter, at two academic conferences. The feedback and questions from conference attendees was invaluable and it became clear that the project would benefit from follow-up interviews. 10 of the 19 participants from the initial stage agreed to follow-on interviews and this second stage added depth and nuance to the project. One major theme to emerge is that each participant spoke of acting as something of a 'lightning rod' for their interlocutors' self-doubt. The women's response to this is varied: some felt vulnerable, and others empowered. Clare is now drawing on wider literature – including social philosophy and social theory – to develop an academic article that frames these insights, thereby contributing to the academic debate and improving the working lives of women who stammer.



Dr Clare Butler

Supporting The Most Relevant And Wide Ranging Research

The Trust has been supporting the work of Barbara Moseley Harris, a PhD student at Birmingham City University, as she conducts a Delphi study (which asks people with relevant experience for their ideas about a topic in order to form a consensus) into the views of adults who stammer. This work is of vital importance in giving stammerers a voice in shaping the research agenda on stammering.

25 adults who stammer were asked for their thoughts about which topics, questions and interventions around stammering they would like to see researched. These ideas were then organised into a survey that asked a further 150 adults who stammer to rate the importance of researching each suggestion. The data is currently being analysed and the findings will be used to shape the focus and direction of Barbara's ongoing research.

The Trust provided the funding for a payment of £5 per participant, all of whom are adults who stammer, to encourage the widest possible participation in the research. Offering payment has enabled Barbara to use population-wide recruitment sources. Initial findings suggest that this approach has been successful, with over half of participants in the study reporting no past or present membership of stammering-focused organisations or services.

www.bcu.ac.uk/research/social-sciences/health-and-wellbeing/research-projects/stuttering-intervention-perspectives-of-adults-who-stutter



Barbara Moseley Harris

Supporting NHS Staff Who Stammer



Dr Vaughan Parsons

The Trust continues to fund the NHS Stammering Network as it offers free online resources, explores themes such as 'Risk and Benefits of Being Open About Stammering at Work' and hosts regular theme-based virtual drop-in sessions for its NHS staff members. These online, peer-led sessions have included 'Managing Difficult Speaking Situations in the Workplace' and 'Staying Voice Active at Work'. Representatives from the Belfast Stammering Community Support Group and the Ministry of Defence Stammering Group have joined meetings to share their own insights and experiences.

This year, Dr Vaughan Parsons and trustee Norbert Lieckfeldt attended a virtual meeting with a group of medical practitioners in the USA who are setting up a similar employee-led group for healthcare workers, and they were able to offer valuable ideas and suggestions.

The Network are pleased to report that they have extended their dedicated website hosting arrangements until May 2027 using the approved funding from the Trust, with a generous free six months added by the website developers, Redactive.

www.nhsstammeringnetwork.uk

CALLING ALL NEW RESEARCH APPLICATIONS!

Have an idea? Since the Dominic Barker Trust's creation in 1997, we've sought to fund projects with practical applications which are lead, supported or supervised by recognised academic or other institutions, including start-up funding for new initiatives. We remain keen to receive applications from a wide basis, and will look to seed-fund via small grants as well as funding larger projects. If you have an idea for a project, to be undertaken at a recognised institution, please get in touch via enquiries@dominicbarkertrust.org.uk and send us a 200-word summary as a pre-application step. The trustees will then indicate whether they'd like to receive a full application. The full range of our research projects past and present can be found on our website.

FUNDRAISING

We are enormously grateful to all of the individuals and organisations who hold events, raise money and support us during the year.

Charity Golf Day

Piers Pollard and his team put together a hugely enjoyable and successful charity golf day at Aldeburgh Golf Club in May this year, attended by 18 teams. The event raised almost £12,000 for the Trust and our thanks go also to all who so generously donated and bought auction lots and raffle prizes. This was a really wonderful opportunity for us to reach a new and different audience and to spread the word about the work of the Trust further afield.

FUNDRAISING



Quiz Night

We held another fun, challenging and informative Quiz Night in the conducive surroundings of the Royal Hospital School in April last year. The evening not only raised almost £1,500, but was also an opportunity to raise awareness and to update our valued donors about our research. Birtan Demirel gave an inspirational talk about his work in Oxford and the 12 teams were then put through their paces by our fiendish quizmaster Toby. Several guests commented on how valuable it was to hear directly from a recipient of one of our grants.

The Trust Quiz Night

CHRISTMAS CARD AND GREETINGS CARDS

The full range of our beautiful Christmas and Greetings cards are available for a donation via our website

www.dominicbarkertrust.org.uk/cards-for-sale

Our most recent card features gorgeous pictures by the wildlife photographer Nick Hurst of preening gannets on the front and a cheeky water vole on the back. We have enjoyed Nick's beautiful images many times on our cards and are very grateful to him. Blank cards with no message inside are also available.



Our latest greetings cards

WHAT IS DOM'S FUND?

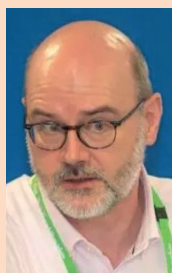
The Dominic Barker Trust, a charity known as Dom's Fund, was set up in 1997 in memory of Dominic Barker, who had a persistent stammer and who took his own life in 1994, aged 26. The primary aim of Dom's Fund is to fund research into stammering, with a view to the development of effective support to people who stammer and their families. *The Dominic Barker Trust, Hon DCL (East Anglia), Registered Charity No 1063491, Pound Close, Harkstead Road, Holbrook, Ipswich IP9 2RA. 01473 328530 enquiries@dominicbarkertrust.org.uk www.dominicbarkertrust.org.uk*

OUR TRUSTEES

The work of the Trust would not be possible without a dedicated board of trustees who ensure that our work is carried out responsibly and cost-effectively and that it meets the stated objectives and aims. The trustees – who come from different backgrounds and bring a wide range of complementary skills and experience with them - also work tirelessly to support fundraising initiatives and to promote the cause.



Toby Kramers,
Chairman



Norbert Lieckfeld



Eleanor Barker



Guy Barker



Dr Steve Davis
OBE



Chloe Chancellor



Sarah Aggett

HOW TO SUPPORT US

The trust is entirely dependent on the generosity of its contributors. You can make a donation:

- ONLINE: At www.dominicbarkertrust.org.uk where you will be redirected to the Just Giving site.
- BY EMAIL: enquiries@dominicbarkertrust.org.uk
- BY POST: Send a cheque.
- BY PHONE: 01473 328530
- TWITTER: @stammerresearch

Your donations are used only to fund research and activities related to research projects. The Trust has minimal overheads; it has no employees, owns no property or vehicles and the administration is done freely by Trustees and volunteers.

General Data Protection Regulations 2018 - Privacy Notice

The above Regulations came into effect on 25 May 2018, and this notice is to reassure all supporters, volunteers and grant applicants that your data privacy is protected. We hold only personal names, contact details and information about donations to and grants from the Dominic Barker Trust. All this information has been volunteered by you and is held by the trust for administration in order to support research into the causes of stammering. The trustees will not use this information for any other purpose (or disclose it to third parties) or hold it for longer than necessary. If you would like to know about the data we hold, or to amend or delete it, please contact the trust in writing or by email: enquiries@dominicbarkertrust.org.uk

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