

NZ attitude to dyslexia stuns

22 July 2006

By ELEANOR WILSON

A British academic is "absolutely astounded" that dyslexia is not recognised as a condition in New Zealand.

Dyslexia expert and Edinburgh University senior lecturer Gavin Reid criticised comments by Education Minister Steve Maharey this month on TV One's Close Up.

Neither the Ministry of Health nor the Ministry of Education recognises dyslexia.

Reid, who was in Christchurch yesterday for a teachers' seminar, said the Government's attitude added to the stigma attached to the condition.

"It's a statement which absolutely astounds me. It's out of step with the whole of the world," he said.

Dyslexia took different forms, but as a condition it related to barriers in processing information and could be recognised in brain scans.

"If they're reluctant to use the term, it's going to add to confusion and to anger and anxiousness that children, teachers and parents will share," Reid said. "It's also important to inform children, particularly adolescents, what it is when they're wondering, 'Why am I not learning as quickly as other people?'"

Maharey, in a television interview with presenter Paul Henry, said the learning difficulties associated with dyslexia were recognised by the ministry, but they were too broad to be described by one word.

Maharey was asked: "Do you accept dyslexia exists as a learning disability?" He replied: "No."

He later qualified the answer, saying, "You're looking at a range of behaviour which in some countries people have chosen to call dyslexia but in most countries has been difficult to categorise".

He said 1 per cent of young people had such "learning difficulties", compared with a figure of 5% provided by dyslexia charity Spelled.

Maharey yesterday told The Press that New Zealand's education system was responsive to, and resourced to deal with, dyslexia, even though it did not recognise the term.

"The Ministry of Education provides specialist support for children identified as having learning difficulties," he said. "Their advice is that there isn't a specific medical diagnosis for dyslexia."

The ministry's operational policy manager in the Special Education Group, Sally Jackson, said teachers were taught to recognise children having difficulties with reading, writing and spelling, who were then provided with assessments and specialist support.

"Dyslexia is a term that is often used to describe children experiencing a wide range of difficulties with reading, writing and spelling," she said.

"Internationally, there is considerable debate and uncertainty in defining this group of children because it does not appear to be a single 'condition' or a specific learning difficulty."

Spelled Canterbury president Laura Cary said she believed greater teacher education was needed so problems were found earlier.