

A Step Ahead

New certification gives students an edge on brain injury rehab

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Student Sarah Drumheller and her internship supervisor Elizabeth Barbin talk with a patient at Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital.

Treating adults with brain injuries is a complex endeavor. Not only are the consequences of a brain injury from a stroke or a trauma like a fall or car accident complex – affecting thinking, acting, feeling, and expression – they can vary wildly from person to person. But now, a new program is giving some UNH graduate students a head start in working with brain-injured adults. Master's students in the [Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders](#) can earn a Provisional Certified Brain Injury Specialization from the Brain Injury Association of America before they graduate, increasing their professional preparation in the area of traumatic brain injury rehabilitation.



STUDENT SARAH DRUMHELLER AND HER INTERNSHIP SUPERVISOR ELIZABETH BARBIN TALK WITH A PATIENT AT NORTHEAST REHABILITATION HOSPITAL.

“We know that brain injury is an important area for rehabilitation. We have this program to help students better prepare to work in the field,” says Bryan Ness, assistant professor of communication sciences and disorders, who launched the pilot program at UNH.

Because of the cognitive impairments so often associated with traumatic brain injury, many patients require the services of speech-language therapists. This provisional certification, for which candidates study a required text then take an exam, provides students with more specialized knowledge than their UNH coursework can. Studying for the exam, says Ness, students learn about legislative issues related to brain injuries, for instance, or drug interactions common to those patients.

About half the students majoring in CSD pursue careers in health care, many of them working with adults with brain injuries (the other half work with children). Master’s student Sarah Drumheller is one of them: She did her undergraduate studies at UNH in CSD, intending to work with children, but has since decided to pursue a career with brain-injured adults. It’s satisfying, she says, helping adults recreate their lives after such a traumatic event.

Drumheller is one of four CSD master’s students who achieved the Provisional Certified Brain Injury Specialization last summer. “It’s been a really positive experience,” she says, and one she anticipates will bring benefits in the job market. “Having a brain injury specialization is being recognized in the field. It’s something on my resume that I can point to and say ‘I’ve done this work.’”

Elizabeth Barbin ‘10G is Drumheller’s internship supervisor at [Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital at Pease](#), where the two are working with a young person who suffered a traumatic brain injury, assisting her with skills from swallowing and language to cognition. “In the short time Sarah has been with me it is clear that she is an excellent student. She is a quick learner, she asks insightful clinical questions and has wonderful interpersonal skills,” says Barbin. “I expect her readiness has primarily come from her coursework, although the Brain Injury Specialization has likely also assisted with her preparation, particularly for educating patients and their families.”

Master’s student Taryn Columbe also earned her provisional certification last summer; she’s been able to apply her knowledge in her internship at Rockingham County Nursing Home. “Having the understanding of how to approach brain injury patients will help me facilitate the success of patients who have these disorders,” she says.

Columbe’s internship hours – as well as Drumheller’s at Northeast Rehab – will count toward the 500 hours needed to achieve full certification from the Brain Injury Association.

Given the positive feedback from the first cohort of certified students, Ness anticipates that four to five CSD students will seek this certification each year.

“Students feel that in a competitive job market, having this certification gives them a leg up in the job market,” he says.

- WRITTEN BY:

Beth Potier | Communications and Public Affairs | beth.potier@unh.edu | 2-1566

PHOTOGRAPHER:

Lisa Nugent | Web & Mobile Development

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