

Thank You, Mayor Hales, for Helping to Raise Awareness for Disorders of Feeding and Swallowing

By Joanna Close

Joanna is a speech-language pathologist and Portland resident.

Ed Steger will visit Portland from Texas for the first time this week and he won't dine out at a single restaurant. Not Andina. Not Lardo. Not Por Que No. Instead, Ed will ask his Uber driver to stop by a grocery store on the way to his hotel, so he can stock up on Boost shakes and bottles of Coffee and Vanilla Frappuccinos, the entirety of his diet. It's not that Ed wouldn't love to enjoy our fine city's reputable eateries, but he won't get to say for himself whether PDX is indeed one of the top food cities in the U.S. – because he has *dysphagia*.

Dysphagia - pronounced “dis-FAY-juh” or “dis-FAH-juh” - is the fancy word for disorders of feeding and swallowing. One in 17 people will experience dysphagia at some point in their lifetime, from early infancy to older adulthood. It is often vastly underreported and not widely understood by the general public, underlining the importance of raising awareness about the sometimes devastating physiological and psychological consequences of the disorder. As such, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales has declared February 26-March 4 “Swallowing Disorders Awareness Week.”

Given that eating is central to much of our social life – especially here in a city like Portland – dysphagia is linked not only to malnutrition, dehydration, and pulmonary compromise, but to increased social isolation, anxiety and depression. Dysphagia does not discriminate based on age, gender, ethnicity or income level. Many of us don't ever have to think about the texture of the food we eat, the viscosity of the liquids we drink, how to chew, or the rather advanced and complex muscle processes by which we protect our lungs while having a meal. That is, until we *do* have to think about it, whether as a patient ourselves or as a loved one or caregiver. Premature infant birth. Meningitis. Heart disease. Cleft lip or palate. Autism. Respiratory illness. Alzheimer's disease. Head and neck cancers. Stroke and traumatic brain injury. Parkinson's disease.

As for Ed, he developed chronic dysphagia following surgery for squamous cell carcinoma of his tongue and oral cavity in 2004, at the age of 53. Since then, he's become an advocate for fellow patients, currently serving as president of the not-for-profit and patient-oriented National Foundation of Swallowing Disorders. Ed will be in town for the Dysphagia Research Society annual meeting March 2-4, which brings together clinicians and researchers from a variety of disciplines (e.g. gastroenterology, neurology, otolaryngology, radiology, speech-language pathology, nutrition, and psychology) from all over the world. Visiting Portland for the first time, Ed doesn't think of Portland as a city just for foodies. Instead, he's looking forward to taking in the sights and sounds of the more natural parts of the city. Hopefully Forest Park and the Willamette River, and maybe a jaunt west to the Oregon coast or east to Multnomah Falls, will sell Ed on the beauty of Portland travel after all.