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Declaration of

Competing Interests

None declared.

My Experience with a Middle Ear Implant

I suffer from acute sensorineural hearing loss brought about by years of exposure to continuous loud machinery noise before the introduction of regulations that required the use of ear defenders and sound deadening enclosures on machines. This condition prevails in both of my ears and being progressive, I eventually had to resort to wearing NHS BTE analogue aids in both ears. I quickly found that I could not tolerate wearing these devices for any length of time and developed a routine that had me using them on a discriminatory basis.

When the NHS commenced their nationwide trials of digital aids I was fortunate enough to have my analogue aids replaced by the much-improved digital models, but these were still BTE devices therefore my toleration problem was not resolved.

When I read an article in a national newspaper about this new device called the Vibrant Soundbridge that was implanted and did not require anything to be inserted into the ear I thought my prayers had been answered and I immediately made enquiries through the usual medical channels to see if I could be considered for this revolutionary new aid to hearing.

After a series of consultations with NHS otology consultants, I was eventually referred to the South of England Cochlear Implant Centre (SOECIC) at the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research at Southampton University for extensive audio tests to determine my suitability for this device and these revealed that whilst my low frequency hearing was still relatively unimpaired, my high frequency hearing range was substantially degraded to the extent that my understanding of normal speech and everyday sounds was seriously impaired.

When these tests were completed I was sent for a CT scan to check that there was no impediment to the surgery required to implant the internal part of the Soundbridge. Everything proved to be satisfactory and I was admitted to hospital on July 26th, 2001 for the required surgery to be undertaken.

There followed a period of some twelve weeks to allow the surgery to effectively heal before the external audio processor could be fitted but, at last, the big day came and with some trepidation I attended the Clinic at Southampton University to be 'Tuned In' by the manufacturer's experts. Driving

home afterwards I tried various volume levels on the car radio and came to the conclusion that nothing had changed, my hearing was no different and I had the feeling that all the testing and the eventual surgery had been to no avail.

Feeling pretty depressed about this, I rang the SOECIC at Southampton and told them what I was experiencing. They were as puzzled as I was, and asked me to return the following day so that they could investigate the problem. It was during these investigations that the obvious dawned upon us; during the 'tuning in' session all the test characteristics of my hearing loss pattern had been programmed into the device, but setting an appropriate volume level had been overlooked. When this was done my life changed; I now had nothing in my ears causing irritation and discomfort, I simply had one small device about the size of a ten pence piece, tucked under my hair just above my left ear, causing no discomfort whatsoever, and I could hear the birds singing again.

Why my left ear? Well I thought it would be better for when I was driving as my now 'good' ear would be facing the passenger!

In July my soundbridge will be nine years old and I have had no cause to regret having had it implanted, it has changed my life and more than simply replacing the two BTE devices it has vastly improved my quality of life in every way. Since the original device was fitted I have had several upgrades and now benefit from an eight channel digital processor that I believe is as close to natural hearing as it is possible to get. I am still high frequency deaf, nothing can ever change that until ear transplants become the norm but the Vibrant Soundbridge is, in my experience, as near to an ear transplant as it is currently possible to get and I never want to be without it. ■