The Miracle of Cochlear Implant

By Betty Coombs

I am an 84-year-old deaf widow living on my social security and working as a volunteer helping the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to cope with their hearing loss. I have recently been the recipient of a cochlear implant. No hearing person could possibly understand the miracle of hearing birds and being able to carry on a conversation with people that the cochlear implant provides.

I have lived in that so called "quiet world" since early childhood, and hearing things now that I can't identify is an ongoing adventure.

One thing that has been so great is hearing automobiles. I have a hearing dog that I walk every morning and it has been scary as the road is narrow and many cars come down the hill very fast. I could not hear them coming until now. It is such a relief to be able to tell when a car is coming before it is right beside me.

Something funny happened too. I kept hearing women's voices talking on and on. I got tired of hearing them and wished they would stop. Finally, at home, where there were no women to be talking, I realized that my shoes squeak and when I stop moving the voices stop.

There are three parts to a cochlear implant.

1. The operation where an electronic device is surgically placed just under the skin in the mastoid bone. This operation is performed by a surgeon while the patient is under anesthesia. There is a period of about six weeks when the incision is healing. There is no hearing left at all in that ear. It is a permanent implantation. The decision to have this done is not made lightly. Many factors have to be considered before the final decision is made.

2. The day the external part of the implant is attached is a day to be remembered for many long years. It is exciting, fearful, with high expectations in spite of many people giving the advice of "don't expect too much too soon". Then the wonderful words "can you hear me speaking to you?" loud and clear. This is a very happy day.

3. Mapping. I have no idea where that term came from but this is where a highly trained audiologist works with a computer to "map" your implant. The first one is confusing and sometimes amusing but so important. Mapping must be done with the audiologist over a period of weeks until you are both satisfied that you are getting the most out of this implant.

People change, health can change, many environmental things can change the mapping, so having a good audiologist who learns about you and what you are trying to achieve is very important.

Doctors who have training in cochlear implants are in very short supply. Trained Audiologists who work with the implanted are in even shorter supply. So,
completing the surgery may require implant recipients to travel to Los Angeles or San Diego, which may be difficult for some and may require that arrangements be made for a friend or relative to help.

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