

Tygerberg Hospital celebrates 400th cochlear implant

On 24 January 2011 hearing impaired Connor Muller (aged 5 years) of Plumstead received his first link to enter the hearing world. This first experience for Connor was a 400th for the Tygerberg Hospital Cochlear Implant Unit.



Remarkably, the same surgeon and audiologist who accomplished the first nucleus cochlear implant procedure in South Africa almost 25 years ago, performed this operation, the 400th, on Connor.

Connor was born with a hearing impairment. His mother, Cheree, hopes that the implant will enable Connor to attend a mainstream school with twin-brother Cole one day. He is a confident and happy child and was an excellent candidate for a nucleus cochlear implant.

Dr Derrick Wagenfeld (ear nose and throat surgeon) and Lida Muller (audiologist) pioneered cochlear implants in South Africa when they first connected 24-year-old bank clerk, Rinelma Wapenaar, to sound at the Tygerberg Hospital on 4 November 1986. This was the beginning of a phenomenon that opened up new worlds for people with hearing disabilities. Rinelma, who still does her annual follow-up's at the Tygerberg Cochlear Implant Centre, has since married and has two children. Without the nucleus implant, however, her world would have been completely silent.

No age restriction

Although the program started off with implanting into an adult, the procedure is now routinely offered to babies as young as six months old with hearing disabilities. The Tygerberg Cochlear Implant Unit has no age restriction - its oldest patient received a nucleus implant at the age of 84.

The Tygerberg team has since expanded to 3 surgeons, 4 audiologists, 1 radiologist and 2 speech and language therapists. The team attends to, and has on its books, 149 adults and 351 children with hearing disabilities.

The technology of the implanting system also developed significantly since 1986 with improved coding strategies and the transferring of sound. The speech processor that fits on the ear is also much smaller than the models of 1986 - an aesthetic advantage to recipients.

Costs

Rinelma's implant in 1986 cost R27 000. Today this costs R199 000 excluding other medical and hospital expenses. The Tygerberg Hospital's budget covers the expenses for a few patients without medical aid. However, such patients still have to contribute towards their implant. Others have to pay or raise funds for their own implants.

Hearing is a basic sense that connects us to people and our environment. Being deaf is not a life threatening condition, but deprives people from a very basic function that is required to live a meaningful life. A cochlear implant can reconnect people like Connor and Rinelma to sound. It can give a hearing impaired person the opportunity to develop or regain spoken language, attend a mainstream school, expand career opportunities, increase income potential, function independently and reduce dependency on the state and social services.

Now hear this... here's HearUs

The cochlear implant industry provides a beneficial service and product to the hearing impaired community. However, according to audiologist Lida Muller, it is sad that many good candidates cannot afford an implant. To assist patients to obtain a cochlear implant, HearUs, a non-profit organisation that operates in close association with the Cochlear Implant Unit at the Tygerberg Hospital, was established in 2001 by parents of deaf children who have cochlear implants. Numerous beneficiaries have received cochlear implants with the assistance of this organisation.

People who would like to obtain more information can contact Lida Muller at +27 (0) 21 938 5080 or Santie van der Walt at +27 (0) 83 270 6347 at HearUs to make a contribution towards this life changing cause.

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