

Cochlear Implant - A Spouse's Perspective

by Helen Dusenbury

Imagine our surprise when we were told that my husband, Dick, qualified as a candidate to receive a cochlear implant (CI). Dick had been told his hearing loss is due to nerve damage, and that nothing more could be done, except to wear a hearing aid in both ears. But after hearing Dr. Eric Sargent, from the Michigan Ear Institute, speak at a SHHH meeting, we realized that Dick would qualify. Fortunately, Dick's worse ear could be implanted. I was so happy for Dick - it might mean that we could converse normally, listen to music together, talk in the car, and maybe even continue our square dancing. Even if none of those happened, I'd be happy if he could just hear me talk to him. The surgery had few risks, and so the decision for us was easy.

After the surgery, it was several weeks before the implant could be activated, and waiting was difficult. As he now had no hearing in one ear, Dick had to depend on the other ear to hear. I was often frustrated at the difficulty in communicating with him. I found myself jabbering about something when I suddenly realized he didn't even know I was talking. Keeping a sense of humor was helpful, but at times I couldn't see the humor at all. Dick would often interrupt me when I was talking because he wasn't aware I was talking. I felt angry, then guilty. After all, it wasn't his fault he couldn't hear, and he'd gone through all this with the hope of being able to hear better.

Finally the day arrived for the activation. I went with Dick to almost all of the appointments with the audiologist, as the processor had to be programmed specifically for my voice. We spent about 2 hours with the audiologist, while she set up the program for the implant. And he could hear! I couldn't believe the difference. He could hear even me! We were both elated, and I had high hopes of gradual improvement with more adjustments to the processor. But our problems weren't over. Soon after leaving the office, the processor began to make static-like crackling noises. This naturally impeded hearing, and Dick was so annoyed by it, he preferred not to wear it. Back to the audiologist. Adjustments were made, but the crackling continued. A new processor was ordered. At first it worked well, then the crackling began again. So far, Dick has had 4 processors. However, after a recent visit to the audiologist and a representative from the company, the problem of static seems to be solved.

I've asked myself if the surgery was worth it, and if I'd encourage him to do it if we'd known all the problems involved. My answer is yes! I do see a difference in his hearing. Our conversations are closer to normal. Each person's experience is different. Dick will never have perfect hearing, but it has improved a lot. We have both come to accept his hearing loss and have found pleasure in things that don't involve much hearing, such as going to museums, visiting our children, traveling, seeing friends, and reading. We are both active in our church and other volunteer activities. I admire Dick's determination to stay involved in the life around him in spite of his loss.