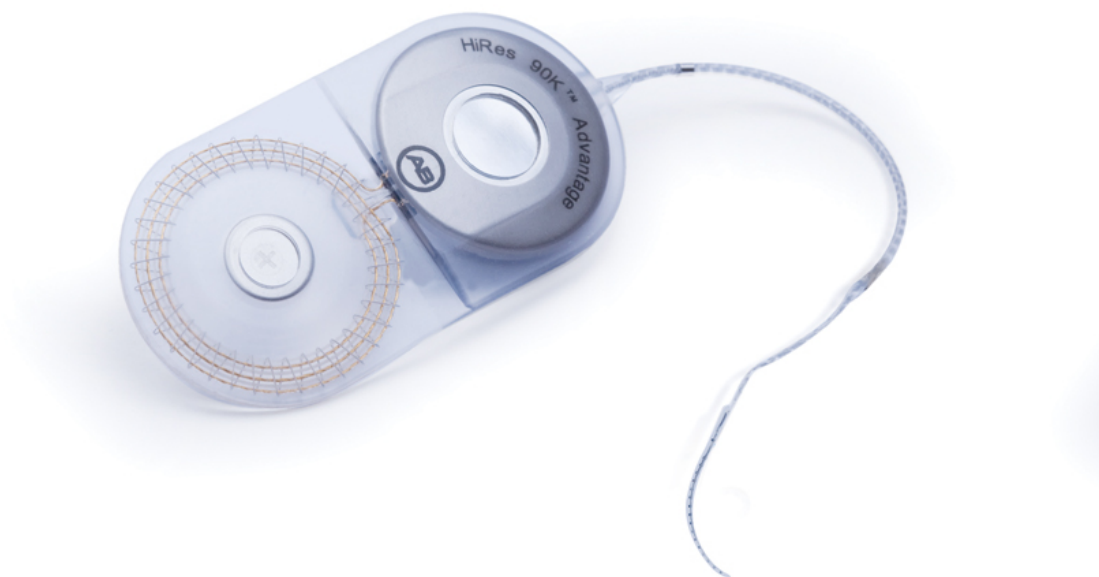


## When Hearing Changes, So Does Life

Published January 21st, 2016

Gael Hannan



“Gael, we’re going to give you a cochlear implant!”

I looked at the doctor blankly for a moment. Then, “You are?”

“Yes, we are.” He paused, “Do you *want* a CI?”

And that was the moment my life changed – again. How did I really feel about getting a cochlear implant?

For years I’d been believed that in spite of my severe to profound hearing loss, I would not qualify under Ontario’s health system that provides funding for only 320 cochlear implants each year. I was too “highly functioning,” I did “well enough” with my hearing aids and superb lipreading skills. But this past summer, I had an appointment with an Ear, Nose & Throat surgeon to discuss my new-found hell of tinnitus and hyperacusis. He couldn’t help with the hell, but did I want to be referred for a cochlear implant evaluation? When I said I didn’t think I’d be approved, he looked at my audiogram which hasn’t changed much in recent years; it shows that, without hearing aids, I don’t hear anything quieter than a slamming door two feet away. He suggested there was no harm in going through the evaluation. What he really meant is that I don’t do as well as I think I do.

Looking back, I agreed to the referral for several reasons, some of them valid, others not so much.

Part of me wanted to be turned down because hey, I really *am* amazingly high-functioning and have got this thing so licked, that an implant could not possibly improve my communication.

On the other hand, having seen how other people had flourished with a CI, I wanted to hear as well as they do, which is way better than me. Some no longer even need to speechread! I had another secret wish: many CI users report that, after implantation, their tinnitus and/or hyperacusis diminishes or – miracle of miracles – disappears completely.

Then there's the vain me who, after 20 years of wearing aesthetically pleasing hearing aids, asks herself do I really want to wear that little satellite dish on the side of my head? What if it doesn't come in the same shade as my hair? An equally shallow thought is that going through the CI process would make for a good blog series. (That was just a tiny, passing thought, although we bloggers are always looking for topics. Just saying.)

After swishing around this cocktail of reasons, I said yes, let's do it...send off the referral.

At my first CI evaluation by the audiologist, I sat in a small room facing a speaker, wearing my hearing aids. As voices came out of the speaker at a comfortable volume, my job was to repeat their sentences. This purely auditory test effectively eliminated my fallback communication strategy – my one stellar ability – of speechreading. I failed it *miserably*; many sentences didn't make sense and neither did my interpretation. (The audiologist especially enjoyed the one which sounded like German to me, a language I don't understand let alone speak, but I gave it my best shot with something like *ja, mein inken-dinken-clinkenboomer!*) Then, when background noise was added to the voices, I failed *abysmally*.

At my next appointment two months later, the surgeon gave the CI green light and now the clock has started ticking.

When *hearing* changes, *life* changes. I have seen the struggles of people when they realize *yes, it's true*, I really do have hearing loss. I have watched the pain of those who experience a sudden and sharp drop in hearing of 5 decibels or more. Life becomes different, more difficult. It takes time and work to adapt, both emotionally and with technology. On the other hand, I have heard the grudging admissions of friends and family that hearing aids *have* helped in ways they did not expect. Through the years, I have been affected not only by negative changes in my hearing such as my recent, anxiety-inducing head noise, but by the *potential* for my situation to improve, the *hope* that it will and *gratitude* when it has.

Cochlear implants have changed life for tens of thousands of people. Who knows? Maybe this time next year or perhaps a few months after that, you will be reading a joy-filled article about how my life has changed, once again, for the better.

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

*Adapted with permission from HearingHealthMatters.org*