

THE JOURNAL of SHHH AUSTRALIA INC.
Self Help for Hard of Hearing People

hearing matters

AUGUST 2005

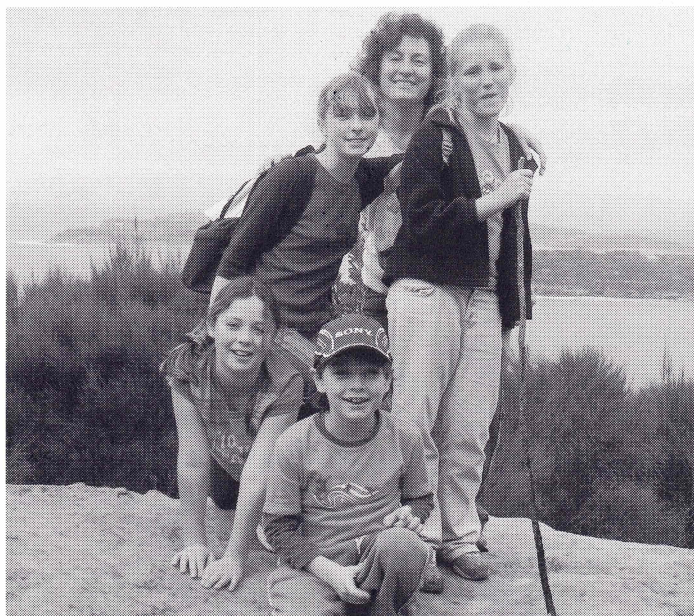
SHHH Australia Inc
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Turramurra NSW



SUE WALTERS

Winner of the 2005 Libby Harricks Achievement Award

SUE WALTERS' STORY



I grew up in a hearing world - the second of five children in my family, with two brothers and two sisters. I've always appreciated nature, as a child learning to recognise birds by the distinct calls they made. I learned classical piano, completing all exams up to Grade 6. I also loved singing, especially in the school choir singing descant in the choral concerts at Sydney Town Hall or with the congregation at church.

At school I learned easily, soaking up information by simply listening, always keen to learn and try something new, always with a book to read close at hand. I was quite cheeky too, stirring up my siblings and friends just for the camaraderie.

In 1984, aged 22, I nearly died from meningococcal meningitis. I didn't remember anything for 4 days. When I regained consciousness, I had lost all my hearing and gained severe tinnitus instead, lost my balance, and for a while lost the use of my left eye and my legs. I found out later that a church had held an all-day prayer meeting for me and for this I am eternally grateful. I survived remarkably well, though the odds were stacked against me. I've no doubt there is great power in the Holy Spirit as well as the Human Spirit.

Becoming deaf, after leading a very full, auditory life for 22 years, was a whole new reality that I didn't like very much. My "life" just came to a standstill for a while and became a series of outpatients appointments, following up on problems from the meningitis. At this stage I didn't know anyone else who was deaf!

Professor Bill Gibson showed me the old-fashioned cochlear implant device that was available in 1984 and the equipment that went with it - it looked like a lot of stuff to carry around and I can't say that I was very impressed. The speech processor was the size of a Walkman, while the headset was a wire headband with a microphone and transmitting coil fixed on one end. At first I rejected it as I didn't really believe that I would be permanently deaf and it all seemed a bit too scary!

After 5 months of deafness, I suffered mounting frustrations, so decided to go ahead with the cochlear implant. In 1984, little was known of the outcome for anyone receiving a multi electrode cochlear implant. A single channel device was available but it only provided clues to the rhythm and loudness of sounds.

Professor Bill Gibson is a pioneer in cochlear implant surgery. Most ear surgeons at that time didn't believe it would work. I was the first person in N.S.W. to receive a multi-electrode cochlear implant and the 8th or 9th in the world. My 5-hour operation left me feeling quite sick and sore in the head, as you might expect! These days it's only about 2 hours and an overnight stay in hospital. Early this year Professor Gibson performed his 1000th Cochlear Implant operation.

Sue Walters' story (cont)

I was switched on three weeks later and my immediate reaction was "*what's that noise, it sounds like a Space Invaders game*". After a few minutes of listening, I focussed on someone's lips and realised that this sound did give some meaning to those lip movements and I suddenly realised that I had also been hearing my own voice again. I was one of the first people to demonstrate that using a multi electrode cochlear implant, it was possible to hear speech.

The first thing I did when I got home was pick up the phone and I heard a dial tone for the first time in 5 months! I tried to ring my mother and though I couldn't understand much, could at least ask questions and ask for a YES, YES or NO.

So it was that my time for exploring these new sounds began. Noisy situations were very difficult. I relied on lip-reading a bit, but the implant certainly helped. I got used to wearing the processor and the wire headband.

I had a phone call one night at home from a mother whose 5 year old child was deafened by meningitis. She asked a lot of questions over the phone and by this stage I was able to understand most of what she was saying. This call convinced her that the implant could work for her child and Holly McDonnell became the first child implantee in Sydney. This was the first of many calls I have had from people who want to know what it is like to have a cochlear implant. During the 1980's, I used to visit every prospective implant recipient in N.S.W. to show them exactly how the device worked and could help them.

In 1989, I travelled to meet my friend Wayne (now my husband) in Kathmandu.

On the way I stopped over in Bangkok and took a taxi from the airport. The taxi driver was talkative, but had a very strong Thai accent. I did my best to understand him and he did his best to keep repeating things for me - eventually I realised he was trying to invite himself up to my hotel room! He understood "NO" perfectly well.

Wayne and I trekked around the whole 250km Annapurna circuit. It was a fantastic journey, especially when we had to cross flowing rivers on nothing more than a plank. At times like these I would wrap my processor and headset up in several plastic bags and put it in my pack, as my balance was still not very good. It's amazing how much concentration you can summon at times like these.

I was sleeping on a train in India one night when I woke up to find a fellow Indian traveller had been switching the buttons on my speech processor, which I had placed in the side pocket of my pack, which I was using for a pillow. He must have thought it was some kind of radio, but couldn't get it working!

In 1990, I decided to study Science at Sydney Uni. I had always been interested in science at school and was intrigued by the combination of sciences involved in the development of the CI. I completed my degree after 4 years, but it was quite a struggle listening to lectures and getting to know people - very different to my years of school study as a hearing person.

In 1993 I was given an improved speech processor to trial. With this, I was able to understand so much more on the phone: I could actually hear a lot more speech sounds and my ability to detect different background noises became more finely-tuned. I could identify several different birdcalls.

Sue Walters' story (cont)

Though I still can't really hear a melody, I can detect the different sounds of instruments such as saxophone, strings, and get a reasonable sense of the type of music e.g. classical, jazz, rock etc. I also prefer to watch TV with captions, so that I can fully understand the show and just relax at the same time. I often hear the words that the captioning leaves out of the dialogue!

Two years ago, I upgraded to a BTE processor, so there is no long cable to wear under my clothes. It also has a built-in telecoil which is a great feature, enabling me to use all phones quite easily, even public phones in noisy shopping centres. With just a flick of the T-switch, I can tune into audio loop systems, without having to carry around a special attachment.

Cochlear have just released their 4th generation implant system - a new 24-channel implant with a faster microchip, which is a far cry from the early model I started with 21 years ago. This new system will accommodate future developments in speech processing strategies. I am using updated speech processing technology with my 21 year old implant! A few of my electrodes are not working anymore, but I still hear better than I did 21 years ago, thanks to the advances in technology.

My husband of 12 years, Wayne, has been wonderfully supportive of me. We have 3 beautiful children, who make a lot of wonderful noise and play the clarinet, trumpet and guitar, so my next challenge is to find more time to have a go at these instruments myself and try and tune in my ear to music again. We have lots of fun together, playing, bushwalking, camping and all those other family things.

I can hear almost as well as a hearing person in many situations. I go to my 7 year old son's class most Thursdays and listen to the children read. Children are a little harder to understand than adults, as their voices are often high-pitched and not very loud, but with a little more perseverance, I can usually work out what they are saying. Mind you, a whole classroom of them can be disconcerting!

Recently I was on canteen duty at my children's school. I heard some loud noise and at first assumed it was someone nearby using power tools. I asked *"What's that noise?"* and one of the other Mums replied *"that's the school band rehearsing in the hall"*. Oops! When you get a lot of big, boomy brass and wind instruments together, it's a lot of sound for a little processor to handle!

I now manage well on the phone, even answering calls at Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre, where I now work as Clinical Support Officer two days per week. I never imagined that I would be answering the phone at work.

Situations like meetings and seminars are still challenging- depending on the speaker, sometimes I follow very well and other times it's really hard to keep up. When I go to the theatre, I usually try and get a copy of the script to read before I go.

I still like to talk to people about my cochlear implant because it remains quite a "new" thing and many people are still not comfortable with the idea of a human with bionic parts! Don't let it scare you, just get to know some implantees and see how well it has fitted into their life!

I was a founding member of CICADA (the Cochlear Implant Club and Advisory Association) in

Sue Walters' story (cont)

late 1984, and remain a committee member. CICADA provides support and advice to those considering a cochlear implant. More and more people with hearing aids are now progressing to a cochlear implant as their hearing deteriorates. 70,000 people worldwide have received cochlear implants. Some choose a CI in one ear, while retaining their hearing aid in the other.

If you know someone interested in a CI, bring them along to a CICADA gathering to meet a diverse range of people who have discovered what a difference it can make. We all love to talk, but we also want to HEAR YOU !

(Page 4 picture - Sue with children, Riley (front), Halcyon (left), Ruby (standing left) and friend Maddy (standing right).

Social activities

SHHH members and friends are invited to attend these **CICADA** functions:-

Get-to-gether BBQ 11am-3pm Sunday, 11th September at Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre (SCIC), Old Punt Rd, Gladesville.

Bring own food, BBQ provided. Tea and coffee provided. An opportunity to meet implantees or those being evaluated for an implant.

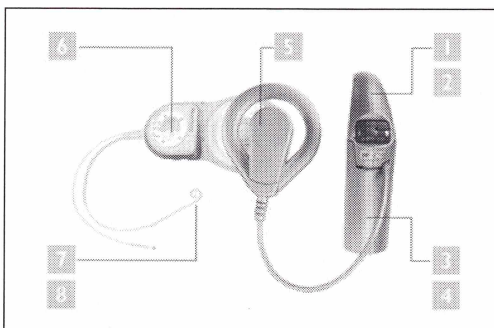
Annual General Meeting, 10.30 am, Sunday, 16th October, SCIC Gladesville

Guest speakers: Bernie Cohen (Sports Producer at Channel 7),

Kerry Coombe, Principal Engineer at Cochlear

Followed by a BBQ

Christmas party, Sunday, 27th November, SCIC Gladesville.



How the Nucleus 3 system works:

1. Sound is picked up by a directional microphone.
2. Sound is sent from the microphone to the speech processor.
3. The speech processor analyzes and digitizes the sound into coded signals.
4. Coded signals are sent to the transmitter via radio frequency.
5. The transmitter sends the code across the skin to the internal implant.
6. The internal implant converts the code to electrical signals.
7. The signals are sent to the electrodes to stimulate the remaining nerve fibers.
8. The signals are recognized as sounds by the brain, producing a hearing sensation.