

Jean

My deafness is hereditary deafness that seems to be mostly in the females: my sister, my mother, my grandmother. When I was about 14 I had my first hearing aid, I was still at school. It was one of those big box things that you wear in front of the wire, it was horrible.

When I was 18 I had an operation on my left ear, after the operation I got an infection, it was quite severe and I ended up losing the whole hearing on that ear. So from then I have never heard from that left ear and was totally dependent on that from my right ear.

Over the years I got to the point where without my hearing aid I couldn't hear anything at all, not even the sirens on a fire engine and things like that. I was totally dependent on a hearing aid, but it wasn't very clear sound from the hearing aid.

I underwent all the tests to see if I met the criteria [for a cochlear implant] and one of the biggest things that I probably did wrong [the first time I was assessed] was because I spent my whole life guessing words, missing words in sentences that I didn't hear - your brain works out what you think the missing word is, and you say it. [The score on this test initially put Jean out of criteria for NHS funding for a cochlear implant.]

Anyway, a couple of years later I was assessed again. Meanwhile my deafness got worse, so this time I did meet the criteria, and it was recommended I have a cochlear implant. That took place in March this year. There was a period of six weeks where I had to wait for the cochlear implant to settle down and the stiches and things to get better, so it was six weeks before they did the switch on. During that time, because I could only hear in one ear anyway, I didn't hear at all, so that was quite difficult. I knew that was going to happen so I prepared myself mentally for it. And in reality, in your life six weeks it is not very much at all.

So then in May I came to be switched on, and it was probably the most incredible thing that's happened. I wasn't expecting it to be very good at first, since they told you how the sound might be a bit awful. Anyway, they switched it on and straight away I could hear voices and it was all very, very loud. It sounded very loud as bear in mind had been in silence for six weeks, and also it sounded very robotic and metallic. When I spoke, my own voice sounded horrible, I thought "I can't stand this!", but obviously I knew it would settle down.

I did not expect to hear so well as soon as they switched it on, as well as I did, so I could have the conversation straight away. There was no not hearing anything, no working out what they were saying, so it all seemed to go very well. I think Zoe [the audiologist] was pleased. We left here, and I could hear sounds that I didn't normally hear, like when we were walking back to the car, I could hear my footsteps. We stopped in a pub on the way home for a meal and I could just hear all the things around: normal sounds I didn't expect to have heard on that first day, but I did. I could have a normal conversation, even if the voice was robotic, I could still hear. But unless I was looking at who was speaking, I wouldn't have been able to tell if it was a man or woman, because it all just sounded a voice, all on the same level. And so there were lots of new sounds at first.

One of the things that I noticed when I was in the house with no other sound going on, there was this funny noise in the kitchen. I couldn't work out what it was - it was the clock! It was only a battery clock, and I wouldn't have expected it to make a noise, but it *was* making a noise, I could hear it. We went out for walks and things - my husband and I like going out for walks - and of course I could hear all the birds, but I didn't realise at first what it was. It sounded like little bells ringing. I asked Gordon what the bells were, and they were birds! Once I realised they were birds, I could hear them, it just didn't sound like that at first, but of course it does now.

Now, generally voices don't sound robotic. They might still be a bit of a problem if I am listening to the telly, and if I am not looking, I am sometimes not sure if it is a man or woman. But when someone has been talking for a few minutes, they sound a bit strange when they first start talking, after they have been talking for a few minutes, they start to sound very normal, and of course I can tell then if it is a man or woman.

It has made a lot of difference to my life because I can hear very well now. I can hear from a distance. If my husband was actually in another room, I could still hear him. Like at work when I had my hearing aid, people had to come and talk to me, stand next to me to talk to me, whereas now, like most people I can hear a few feet away quite comfortably. So I am more involved in what goes on, and it's made me feel more confident. Likewise, when we were with people socialising, before the cochlear implant, when I had my hearing aid, I had got to the point where when there was a group of people, it was very difficult to join in the conversation. I didn't know what they were talking about, so I would quite often not bother. I would just sit and... you know, and so my confidence gradually diminished. Now I feel back to where I used to be, quite confident, quite happy to talk to people.

Compared to when I used to wear a hearing aid, the sound with the cochlear implant is a lot clearer. I can hear whole words, whereas before I probably heard parts of the words. It is very clear and it's fantastic.