

Dean's Story

Hearing Loss of Washington Board Member Dean Olson's Personal Cochlear Implant Story

In February 8, 2005, at 12:30 pm, Virginia Mason Hospital began performing my cochlear implant surgery. I was home by 6:00pm. Thus far, it has been mostly good: my only regret about the surgery was that I didn't have a camera to take a photo of the wrap around my head. I remember, when I got to my apartment, one of my neighbors helped hold the entrance gate so that I could walk down the stairs.

Black eye and swelling: swollen temple area, going back to behind the ear. Swelling subsided by 2 weeks, while black eye was gone in a month.

The wound was cut behind ear lobe, perhaps an inch, but quite small. It oozed, but was ok; just used ointment for a couple days and nights, then nothing to let it dry. The wound itself was wrapped.

First memory after surgery: the loud ringing/humming in my newly implanted ear. I was kind of hoping the surgery would stop that ringing. The first thing out of my mouth was to ask Dr. Backous about that. He answered it sometimes goes on. He stayed there for a long time, working on his work, but within eyeshot, just monitoring my condition. I was in good shape, actually, dressed up, got my stuff and left.

That night, the humming CI ear was loud, while the normal, defective God's ear was ringing slightly. Over the next few days, the humming in the CI ear receded and it rings slightly now. The final subjective observation is the CI ringing flares up a bit more than the other ear, but otherwise it's not as much as the failed God's hearing ear. In summary, the ringing is still there and some humming at certain times. The tinnitus did not go away (one of my surgery hopes) in the CI ear.

Five days following surgery, I experienced vertigo one afternoon for some eight hours after lunch. I'd never experienced that before. I went out for lunch with friends and ate a normal meal but I wasn't ready to eat more than granola sprouts and rabbit sized portions.

During surgery, we discovered my windpipe is allegedly not straight, and this delayed surgery for some 40 minutes. The surgery required two anesthesiologists to insert the breathing tube (other than removing my tonsils at age 5, this was my first surgery). Consequently, during my first week of work, the friend who drove me home after my surgery said my new name is "Deep Throat."

The recovery went normally. I had sore stomach muscles (I assume from the difficulties inserting the breathing tube). But that subsided after a week. My throat was sore for about three weeks, with something hanging skin from the throat. The best food was ice cream, the worst was anything hot or warm - particularly hot rice in those microwave meals. Cold pudding was particularly nasty to my throat. This remedied itself in three weeks. After experiencing strange dreams the first two nights (the images melted like Salvador Dali or Edward Munch paintings), I chucked the pain medicine and went with extra ibuprofen instead. The pain remedy also left me constipated. It was great to

avoid the pain meds. I think I lost about five to ten pounds, which, unfortunately, I have not kept off.

In all, I was at home for ten days, at work for 1/2 days for a week and a half, then kept pushing it. I felt two of my friends were very supportive, the manager was OK by giving me the days off, and my supervisor was OK by allowing me 1/2 days for a little while. But the job's problems persisted, despite a great insurance plan that covered all \$30,00+ except for some \$1,300 co-pays.

On my first day back, a friend informed me that during surgery, after they drilled the hole in my head, Dr. Backous discovered there was nothing inside. There were no post-surgical complications. I experienced slight dizziness for about six to seven weeks.

On my birthday, almost a month after surgery, a little longer than the required recovery period, my audiologist, Allison Zarkos, hooked up and turned on the "external piece." As I sat, still slightly dizzy, but looking at all the things that came from the cochlear implant company's box, she fiddled with all the gadgets, played the techy, nerdy, geeky role. Then, as I lip-read, she said something like, 'now the fun begins'. She turned it on and it was screechy sounding. It was very different, the sounds were high-pitched, with no bass, but I was hearing things w/o using my ear. The external piece's magnet was talking to the cyber piece in my brain.

In eight weeks, I resumed gym workouts. Then, I resumed soccer in May, just in time to sign up for summer season - yippee! Soccer concern: if someone kicks the ball into my ear, will that break the internal piece? Or what if I run into the goal post, particularly when I'm playing goalie? I'm not even sure if those head protection things will protect the internal piece.

My work environment at my old job continued to deteriorate. Negative behavior included high school-like behavior with whisper-whisper in the cubes; I was told folks used my honesty and trusting nature to keep my programming work from succeeding. I knew things were politically charged and held secrets. In May, I asked if the promise to bring me on full-time, as my former boss promised, would happen. My layoff notification occurred in July, with notice in advance for a December layoff, which was updated in October, to lay me off in November, during a long-planned vacation. Then, I was able to negotiate a layoff on first week of December, so that I'd have health insurance coverage until my new job started in January, 2006. This is all relevant for several reasons.

Getting back to the implant in this work environment, I had to delay my progress to use the right hearing aid sooner than the audiologist recommended. The CI also has limitations (not hearing from distance, inability to hear over cube walls, still hard to understand whispering). At work, I wasn't union and I was term-limited-temp, so I thought hearing people can still manipulate the situation in the workplace (or other settings). This happened to two other hearing impaired people, I noticed.

So, my success at work depended on the directors' willingness to foster a climate of diversity or merely to quietly perform lip-service to this. I felt politics and union representation overrode common decencies, such as helping those who are different or at a disadvantage. 2005 was a rebuilding year for me, and I can safely assume I was taken advantage of during this time. The inability to hear over cube walls, over distances and during meetings (with poor hearing

we lose concentration or have "lag" times comprehending words), is hard to deal with in the workplace, as well as other situations.

At my father's funeral, just under three months after turning on the external device, I discovered I understood the words from the loudspeaker. Normally, I was unable to comprehend words from PA and other amplification systems (too fuzzy). I used my right hearing aid for the first time in that endeavor.

First radio voice recognition: Steve Poole on KOMO radio. At first squeaky, but gradually, it came in. Eventually, I could drive and listen to radio better than before.

After work: no hearing aid, even today. At work, both. In noisy spots - restaurants, cars, air flights, etc - the little microphone. Work computer - the cord (when I use it). We have a rather rambunctious group, so I often turn down the CI and hearing aid volume to minimum levels.

For all spring and summer for training, I used the audio cord. And I watched a lot of Olbermann, CNN and talking heads with the audio cord plugged in.

However, at Emmett Watson's Oyster bar, over oysters and seafood plates, the knife and fork noises kind of grate my nerves. Also, I hear them and never did before. Finally, using the personal microphone with my CI amplifies those noises.

As for beer and listening, it's very difficult to do. I don't plan on drinking and trying to listen, so I'm a great designated driver (unless I try to read lips while driving, so in that case, I use the personal microphone, clipped onto a seat belt or shirt.

At first, walking at Green Lake, Seward Park and Tacoma's waterfront were strange. The little rocks on Green lake's path made it quite a challenge to decipher speech. At Tacoma's long park, these Harley machines sounded like screaming machines, and not the normal Harley sound: I thought, "that's plain wrong!" At Seward Park, the winds would interfere with the sound, so wearing a hood or a small towel over the CI device is the way to go.

Later, after my father's funeral in late May, 2005, I was sitting out back and began noticing the tree's leaves' sounds. I hadn't really heard that for several years. It was only four months since the surgery. Later, in June, I had to close my apartment's glass door due to the loud leaves sound - while I was on my t-switch talking on phone. I have it set for some M-setting mixed in with the t-switch setting. I need to modulate my voice's volume level and w/o feedback, I can't do that.

August and September, 2005 interview: phone screen and then actual interviews with a few firms. As for phone screening: aggh. Coping skills are so necessary - to paraphrase, to deal with not hearing on the phone anyway. Phone coping skills, unlike in-person skills, are more tedious and require more help from the hearing person than usual. In summary, the usual phone angst comes back (like when I was laid off 9-5-2001 and had to seek work just before and after 9-11-2001: not a fruitful option). It's my paranoia, many phone screeners screen out those who don't hear well on the phone. I've actually had head-hunters hang up when I mention the hearing impairment during phone call.

Luckily, I passed a few phone screens and began in-person interviews. I was offered the job, though, in September (to begin in January, 06). What I did for the interviews? Just coping skills on the phone screen, then used both the CI and hearing aid for the interview. Up to that time,

Before my new job, I took a vacation to Australia: During the 24 hours of airports and flying, I using the audio cord and then accidentally left it on plane in Sydney. That was a costly mistake. I'm sure the Korean Air folks had no clue when they found it.

Australia: I hear English being spoken but it all sounds so foreign too. Between the shortened words with the "ee" endings, the new, Aborigine words they've adopted and their version of the English accent, I can't understand half of the folks! And they speak so fast too! But some words are easy: like "Barbee" for BBQ....

Return - talking on the plane back up - first time in long time.

During December, after my layoff, I spent time at the Cherry Street Food Bank as a volunteer. During a few days, we had to work in the rain. The risk was damaging the earpiece during a hard rain storm. I used the small sleeve. Also, there were tarps and every now and then, a large buildup of water would fall onto me or possibly my ear. During that time, I finally saw my CI go kaput, and I'm afraid it was moisture.

After 90 days in my new job, I received a review. My manager told me I was a valued employee and kept on treating me accordingly. The new supervisor is doing great. Many folks are more sensitive and willing to work with my hearing loss (or, in my case, gains from the old severe losses!). When coming on board, they bought me a phone with a jack; with my adapter, I can use both CI and hearing aid t-switches (while using speakerphone to the people I call). My new job has been very supportive. At first, I needed to train with Epic, in Madison, WI. They didn't understand what an ALD was. To remedy this, I borrowed \$700 to pay for an FM system (I paid it off last summer). Then I discovered, instead of a neck loop, I could use my CI's audio cord for my training. At the end, Epic was asking me what they could do for ALDs for their new corporate campus.

As usual, meetings are difficult but the climate is not so charged that we can't work with folks who don't hear well. I'm amazed at how nice folks can be in our workplace, helping me get the job done or working as partners on a task to help complete it.

In summary, despite certain musical and distance limitations, the CI significantly improved my communication abilities. Before the CI, to converse, it required the hearing person to repeat their phrases more than once, sometimes write them and the phone was impossible. At work, I was asked to cover the help desk for absent full-time employees, so I used online Relay (there was no Captel option). Today, conversations are much more spontaneous, and I don't tire as easily. I still become tired by late afternoon from hearing all day.

In March, 2005, when the CI was turned on, I couldn't communicate with the CI at all. As 2007 approaches, some 22 months after surgery, I communicate with greater comprehension, with more appropriate responses. With occasional repeats on the phone I'm able to respond much quicker (unless it's a fuzzy cell phone or it's late and I'm tired, thus I can't hear well in any situation).

Successes: One-on-one, I can hear better than many hearing people now. The interpersonal skills were vastly restored. Often, I'm able to hear and understand without reading lips. Speaking on the phone is greatly improved - by either the first time something's said (or usually by second time), I understand what's said. This is a major improvement from the past fifteen years. Presently, my hearing usually picks up the consonants, particularly the "s" or plural/singular sounds. I'm not walking around with misinformation or thinking in singular, when I should be thinking in plurals. This is a very important distinction. Last night, I was sitting on the bus, almost hearing all the words of someone's cell phone call. Now, is that obnoxious? In the past, I was unable to converse on the bus as it was too hard to understand. Now I can do that and hear others better. Now, I am able to walk on the street, with traffic, and converse with friends while walking. Often, if I lean closer, I can converse without lip-reading. Outside, downtown, it's a lot easier, particularly when the speaker is on my CI side. However, the other person must always walk on my left side only, so I can't do the proper etiquette/protocol to let the woman walk on the window side all the time.....

Carrying on a one-on-one conversation during our loud Holiday party here at work in the lunchroom was surprisingly easy. Lunch rooms normally give me fear and sweaty palms but I'm communicating much better in echo chambers now. I was able to understand some words folks said from the tables as I watched Santa Claus perform for us.

Conversing in the car is easier; using CI's personal clip-on microphone make car conversation almost flawless. Listening with my audio cord connected to KOMO online provides great comprehension (my speakers aren't very good - too faint for some reason). It's not so stressful or agonizing to strike up a conversation with total strangers on the bus or in stores with fellow shoppers and sales personnel.

There's only limited challenge to listening at a picnic table, with surf sounds and winds (like at Bondi Beach last November, 2005)! If I need to, I can wear a towel (or in rain, a hood) to shield the CI's mic from wind noises. I listen with the ocean behind me and the external device clips out the noise behind me, to focus on the speaker. Listening at last summer's HLA-WA picnic was really effortless for me; even the distorted PA system wasn't so hard - before it was impossible (I was sitting outside of the shaded area, where it's harder to understand, allegedly). I find it amazing. During soccer games, listening to people on sidelines, without lip-reading is easier (it's very hard when using my right hearing aid: that's telling!). Using the personal lapel microphone in loud restaurants is great. Other times, it's just easier to have private, quiet conversations with the microphone and often, without it. Listening to the PA system at my father's funeral was really nice, despite the windy outdoors that Spring Day. Plus, I'm hearing sounds that I've not heard before. I'm picking up sounds that people with high-frequency loss can't hear (AKA, bird sounds in Chaco Canyon last September that one of my three friends couldn't hear).

Continuing Challenges:

Yes, later at night, when I'm fatigued, I still have troubles. Energy levels at 9pm affect my concentration - even at 5pm, after work I'm often whacked. I still tend to have concerns and worries that affect my sleep - a common occurrence of aging or part of the constant planning involved in hearing loss coping efforts?

Understanding speech from a distance, over cubicle walls, and listening over racket like baggies/potato-chips crinkly noises, hair dryers, water faucets is quite nerve-racking (pun intended) or difficult.

Ballroom dancing is untenable. I tried a quickie session, with quickie training and could never figure out what the trainer said in the echo-y room. Plus, in ballroom dancing, the man is the one who leads. If I can't understand the instructions or get the music's beat, then I can't lead and dance properly. That was a stressful November weeknight (and, for other reasons, a bad date, too).

As for close-up one-on-one conversations, they are much better. In loud restaurants, I perform well with my personal microphone. In general, with the CI, I just hear better; and now, I hear around corners, and can now respond to ask the speaker to come closer so I can understand her/him. It makes it easier to understand than just using my regular CI program 1 with unidirectional setting. In noisy environments, the wide setting is the worse; however, wide setting helps for work meetings in large rooms (but I still have trouble in that situation). Overall, I am happy to face the challenges of hearing again, the challenge of a returning to my the old city where I was born, and I look forward to experiencing life to the fullest!

3/5/07 Update: On Friday, 3/2/07, I received my upgraded external processor. It already works better than the other processor - for conversations. The telecoil works fine on the phone. It was a challenge this weekend at dinner in a nice restaurant. The restaurant's acoustics were difficult, and I experienced a bit of operator error trying to get the personal mic to work. The tv's audio cord works great - I am retraining, but it's not as hard as when I first used the cord in Spring, 2005. Yet I already can tell I'm doing better. Plus, the processor is waterproof. Knowing that, makes it less stressful to be outside using it with our Seattle winter drizzle.

(Kudos to Ben Gilbert: in 2005, Ben inspired me to write a log of my cochlear implant CI experience.)