

It was 1996 and I had 20 years experience of being deaf behind me. In my earlier years, being deaf was something I was almost embarrassed about, after suffering playground bullying all through school life from the moment I was fitted with hearing aids at the age of 5. Even my weekend nights at the deaf club were a secret from my hearing peers at school.

At that time in my life, the Cochlear Implant would have been something I would have snapped up immediately. To me it would have meant an escape from the sniggers of people when I couldn't hear them or would have given me increased confidence in speaking in groups.

However when I was 16, things started to change. My closest friend and I decided to learn sign language. Working my way up to BSL Level Two and continuing to attend Stoke Deaf Club, I began to develop greater self-esteem as I became accepting of myself as a deaf person and was much better able to communicate with deaf friends I'd known since I was a young child. At university, I met more deaf people from other parts of the UK who were extremely confident and did not see deafness as a barrier. I was swept along by their confidence and no longer felt embarrassed to use sign language in public.

So when my dad, who had worn hearing aids from the age of 16, decided to go ahead with the Cochlear Implant, I watched with detached curiosity. Great for him, if it worked I was happy for him, but for me, I was adamant I would never have one. He raved about it. He was so happy with his implant, but still I refused to follow in his footsteps.

Around 18 years old, I had a really bad attack of Menieres, which left me with far less residual hearing. I could barely hear myself play the saxophone or the piano and listening to music had lost its pleasure. Conversation with hearing friends was becoming even more difficult and I found seminars at university a real struggle, despite interpreter support.

Then came the question again: "Why don't you have an implant?" This time I paused before dismissing the idea immediately as I usually did.

I had seen the benefits of the implant in a somewhat amusing way. My dad, who could previously barely distinguish sounds with his hearing aid, was having a trivial Sunday afternoon disagreement with my brother. Cutting the disagreement short by turning round to have a conversation with my Grandfather, he was soon turning back round to deliver my brother a gentle clip around the ear hole. My brother had sworn at my dad, something he had previously got away with in a deaf family, but modern technology had finally revealed to Dad what he had been missing all these years.

I was starting to adopt a different view towards having an implant, but this brought a whole load of worries. Was I selling out to the medical concept that deafness was something to be cured? Would I suddenly lose all of my deaf friends whose company I loved? Would I be met with a barrage of abuse from the grassroots Deaf Community where Cochlear Implants were still highly controversial? All of these worries were far greater than the worries I had about the pain, success and side effects of the operation.

So back to August 1996, having seen the success of my dad's Cochlear Implant and having given deep consideration to cultural, medical and physical concerns, I found myself travelling down to Guy's Hospital in London to be the second recipient of a Cochlear Implant in my family.

I'd already had a comprehensive series of nerve tests, physical checks, hearing test and x-rays to confirm I was a suitable candidate for the implant. I'd seen a psychologist and other implant users to confirm this was the right decision for me and I was told that I could pull out of the process if I felt the implant wasn't going to be right for me.

However I'm glad I did it. It has made my life a lot easier in everyday terms. I can follow some meetings at work without an interpreter, I can speak to my mum on the phone, I'm more aware of sounds around me and I can enjoy music again – I even have an iPod now! My hearing is nowhere near perfect though and colleagues joke that I selectively choose what to hear!

On the day of switch on, I had to travel back to London and stay overnight. My hospital room overlooked the River Thames and I had a perfect view of Big Ben. At first, everyone sounded squeaky, almost like tinny cartoon characters. It was odd, so I was sent off to walk by the river to get a feel for the sounds. Big Ben started to chime the hour and I heard my mum behind me say to my dad "Oh, Big Ben is chiming now." Absent-mindedly I said, "I know". Then the enormity of it dawned on me, not only had I just heard Big Ben chiming for the first time in my life, I'd also heard what my mum said without even looking at her. We shared a teary-eyed embrace at the riverside.

After being discharged from hospital, there were more tears as my dad took us to see Oliver at the Palladium Theatre, the music was incredibly clear to me and I was flabbergasted by the difference a big operation and a small piece of technology made.

Since then I have had to learn what some sounds are. I was amazed to discover that traffic lights still made a beeping noise to help blind pedestrians. I hadn't heard this noise since I was little and thought it was no longer used!

The volume is turned up gradually on the processor so there are no shocks, and you work with the audiologist to decide what is a comfortable level for you. You are not forced into doing what someone else wants you to do, and if you are, you should be looking for a different audiologist!

People vary in their use of the implant. I know people who wear theirs all the time. I like taking mine off when I get home and enjoying some peace and quiet after a hard day's work.

You can still swim; shower and bathe, just remember to take the outside part of the implant (the speech processor) off first!

Given the choice, I would have the implant again. It might not be for everyone, but that's what life is about 'choice'. Having an implant hasn't changed me and I still say I'm deaf, but I made a choice to go through a process that has made certain parts of my life easier and more enjoyable and it worked for me!