

'More than 3 mn children await cochlear implants'

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Dr Ingeborg Hochmair is the founder and CEO of worldwide hearing implant leader MED-EL. In September 2013, Dr Ingeborg Hochmair, was nominated for the prestigious Lasker-DeBaakey Clinical Medical Research Award for the development of the modern cochlear implant, a device that restores hearing to individuals with severe-to-profound deafness through electrical stimulation of the auditory nerve.

Dr Ingeborg Hochmair was recognized for her early contributions to the field of cochlear implants starting with the development of the world's first multi-channel microelectronic cochlear implant that was implanted in Vienna in 1977. In a brief conversation with BioSpectrum, Dr Hochmair talks about hearing problems in India, cochlear implants and MED-EL's role.

How has the technology evolved over the years to overcome this problem?

The technology has been around for over 30 years and is available in India for 20 years. During this time the technology's results have improved, the implants and outer parts have become smaller and more products have been made available to match different types of hearing loss.

For example the MED-EL Bonebridge has just been launched in India. This is designed for people, where sound cannot be transferred through the inner or middle ear and works for some types of single-sided deafness. We also have the Rondo, the world's first single unit processor that is placed discretely behind the ear. Other options include electric acoustic stimulation for partial deafness and Soundbridge for middle ear hearing loss. There really are a wide range of products available providing a number of solutions.

What is the level of awareness among people and how can it be increased?

Awareness is certainly very low, for a number of reasons. Historically, there has been a lack of funding, but the government is now aware and sees this as an important issue that should result in more Indians receiving Cochlear Implants. The health screening procedures of children is not at the level it should be and a high number of home births mean many children with hearing problems go undetected. On top of this, the growth of India, with around 50,000 births everyday, means, that even if a small proportion of these are born profoundly deaf, it is still a huge number of children (and then adults) have hearing problems. We as a hearing solution company need to work with our partners in outlining the benefits across India.

Which age group is most affected with hearing problems?

In India, any age group can be affected, but children especially can reap the benefits of having a cochlear implant. By implanting earlier, the child can develop normally and go on to lead a normal life. The infrastructure is not strong, so we work to support this. We sponsor education in the field of audiology and speech language for young adults from SOS Children's Villages in India, who would like to pursue a career in hearing and speech.

We also work closely with the Pink Crocodile initiative that caters for hearing patients and so far our support reaches out to hundreds of cochlear implant users and provides assessment in several areas, including Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad.

What are Med-EL's solutions to help people with hearing impairment?

The Cochlear Implant is the first and only replacement for the sense of hearing. MED-EL offers the widest range of implantable solutions to treat the various causes and degrees of hearing loss. Cochlear Implants are solutions for people with severe-to-profound hearing loss where hearing aids provide little or no benefit.

An implant is surgically placed under the skin behind the ear. Externally there is a microphone, a speech processor, and a transmitter. Internally, electrodes travel through the cochlear and sending impulses to the brain.