

Cochlear implants bring identity change

Jacqui Metzger has progressive hearing loss, but you'd never know it when chatting with her.

As a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, being hard of hearing is a pretty big deal. Jacqui learned to compensate by using hearing aids, learning sign language, and reading lips. Jacqui became so successful in her practice that she began working with people who are deaf and hard-of-hearing to help them manage their hearing loss more effectively. She also consults with schools and businesses to assist teachers and employers to interact more effectively with hearing-impaired students or employees.

In February 1997, according to Jacqui, **Dr. George A. Gates**, then director of the Virginia Merrill Bloedel Hearing Research Center, changed Jacqui's identity for life by implanting a Nucleus 24-channel cochlear implant. She was the first in the Northwest to receive one.

A cochlear implant is a prosthetic replacement for the inner ear (cochlea). It is not a hearing aid, but a neural prosthesis that electronically stimulates the hearing nerve. Part of the device is surgically implanted in the skull behind the ear and tiny wires are inserted into the cochlea. The external parts are a microphone, a speech processor (that converts sound into electrical impulses), and connecting cables.

"Ten years ago, cochlear implants were used only in people who were completely deaf," says **Dr. Jay Rubinstein**, new



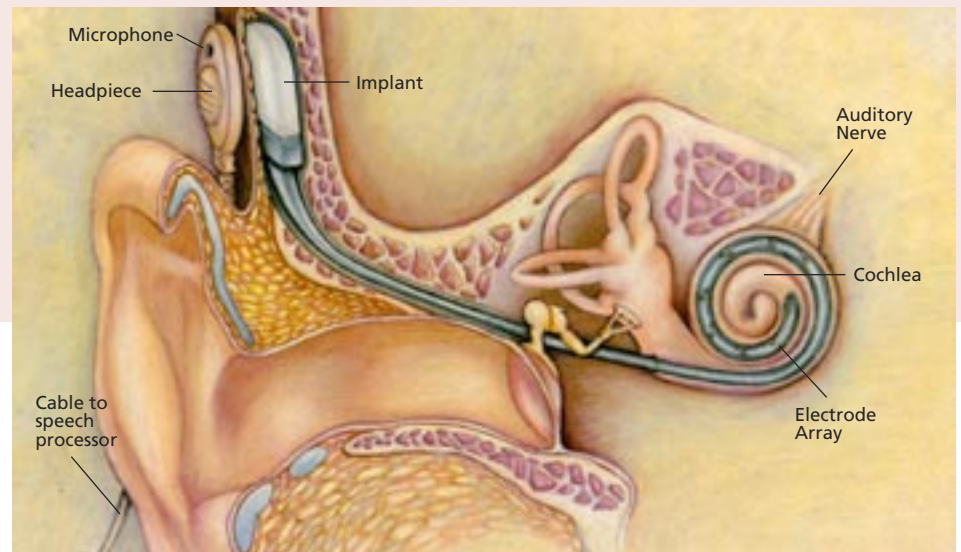
Dr. Jay Rubinstein

director of the Virginia Merrill Bloedel Hearing Research Center. "We found out that these patients are hearing better than those with hearing aids."

The Food and Drug Administration revised the rules and allowed people who could hear up to 50 percent of words in sentences to be candidates for cochlear implants. "Implanted people can, on average,



"Getting this implant has been a life-changing experience. Profound hearing loss was part of my identity. But now, the world is opening up for me in unimaginable ways, bringing all kinds of new and interesting challenges." — Jacqui Metzger



hear 50 percent of single-syllable words, but in some, that figure is now about 80 percent," according to Dr. Rubinstein.

"Part of my research is to make cochlear implants better," he says. "Eventually, there will be fewer hearing aids, because they don't restore speech intelligibility. Implants are improving and actually do more to restore the understanding of speech."

"When my implant was first hooked up, suddenly there was sound!" Jacqui says.

"The audiologist was talking to me. I could hear the intonation of her speech but I couldn't understand the words. The brain is amazing! It didn't take long for me to begin understanding speech through my ears, not through my eyes. I had been totally dependent on lip reading to understand speech; now I could use my ears."

For more information about cochlear implants and other questions about hearing, call the Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery Center at 206-598-4022 or on the Web at: www.uwmedicalcenter.org