

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Lawrence Cleary

Lawrence Cleary is an art dealer and an ENT patient. He is also a recipient of an MBE for his contribution towards establishing the first multichannel cochlear implant programme in the UK. In this article he discusses with **Katherine Conroy** how he became involved with this revolution in hearing technology.



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met with Lawrence Cleary and his wife, Pat, at the home they share in Cheshire. Despite approaching 80 years old, he is still an avid art collector, golfer, and jogger. More than 30 years after he established the HEAR (Help Ear and Allied Research) charity with Professor Richard Ramsden, his enthusiasm for the life-changing potential of cochlear implantation is undiminished.

Perhaps Cleary's own experience of deafness influenced his interest in cochlear implants. From an early age, it was evident that he had problems with his hearing: "Because of that, I had a speech impediment, and I visited the audiology department at Manchester University at the age of nine. They recommended that I be sent to the Liverpool School for the Partially Deaf in Birkdale, Southport. I should have been there until I was 16."

Life at the school was far from idyllic; "it had only opened a few months before I got there – the teachers were not up to speed, they weren't trained". Children were severely reprimanded for using sign language (despite many having profound hearing loss) and lessons were limited to three hours a day, the rest of the time being taken up with various sports. When Cleary developed severe asthma after 18 months, his father brought him home and convinced a local school to accept him. "We had to do a bit of pleading. I was put in the lowest class of the school. I was very fortunate to have a teacher called Mr Clark, one of my heroes. I couldn't hear well and had an awful speech impediment, but he spent a lot of time with me, one on one, teaching me how to pronounce words – he was just fantastic."

After leaving school at 15, Cleary had a number of jobs before becoming an apprentice joiner, and eventually developed a thriving construction company: "The deafness was always a problem, but I got by."

However by 1987, Cleary's better hearing left ear was becoming problematic, with increased deafness and debilitating

vertigo. After several ENT consultations with no improvement in his symptoms, he remembered a friend who had had successful acoustic neuroma surgery performed at Manchester Royal Infirmary by a surgeon named Mr Richard Ramsden. An appointment was made and treatment commenced. An initial examination under anaesthetic became a nine-hour surgery on an extensive left-sided cholesteatoma, resulting in complete hearing loss. Further surgery on the right ear followed some weeks later, restoring sufficient hearing to allow use of an aid.

"Richard [Ramsden] was fantastic. He came and saw me regularly, and spoke to me like a mate. So down to earth, always humorous. And shortly afterwards I said to him: 'Is there anything I can do for you?' He said: 'We really do need to start a multichannel cochlear implant programme in the UK.'"

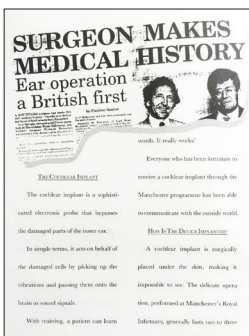
Ramsden and Cleary spent time observing the installation of multichannel cochlear implants in Melbourne and established the HEAR charity in January 1988 (with Cleary as Chairman), but fundraising would be a challenge: "Each implant required £15,000, as well as infrastructure and support staff for rehabilitation; something bigger than coffee mornings was needed."

A few weeks later came a fortuitous opportunity – Cleary won a tandem skydive in a raffle at a charity ball. "I started fundraising straight away. I wrote to all my clients and suppliers to sponsor me, and in around 10 weeks we had the money we needed for the first implant, for a 48-year-old grandmother. The medical correspondent for *The Times* took enormous interest. The switch-on was quite amazing – the patient was even able to recognise one audiologist's Australian accent. The next Saturday night my phone started ringing – it had made the front page of *The Sunday Times*.

"Obviously there were a lot of people

**How you can
restore
someones
hearing.**

HEAR booklet for
potential donors.



Page from booklet made by HEAR to explain cochlear implantation to potential donors – includes a picture of the front page of *The Times* reporting on the UK's first cochlear implant.



Tony Duerr presenting a cheque to Lawrence Cleary outside Manchester Royal Infirmary.



The golf team boarding the jet in Prestwick, Scotland.



Lawrence Cleary's sponsored tandem sky dive which raised the funds for the UK's first cochlear implant.



A round of golf in four countries in a day. (L-R) Andrew Beech (Owner of the Belfry Hotel), Ray Briggs (friend), Professor Richard Ramsden, Lawrence Cleary, Andrew Jenkins (friend), Tony Duerr (chairman of Duerr's Jams).



Lawrence Cleary (right) with Professor Richard Ramsden MBE (left) after receiving his MBE in October 2018.

needing implants so we carried on fundraising. We were all golfers and one of the committee had the idea of getting sponsored for playing a round of golf in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in one day. A friend of mine worked for Nissan and persuaded Michael Hunt (a keen golfer and chief executive of the company) to provide a nine-seater jet and cars. The next year we did five European countries in 24 hours. The success of this (the golf days alone raised almost £100,000) and our other fundraising allowed us to keep ahead of what was needed by the charity. It was a wonderful journey without doubt."

However, the procedure remained controversial: "I got phone calls from the signing Deaf community objecting strongly to what we were doing – especially parents of deaf children. They felt we were interfering with their culture, their way of life. But Richard [Ramsden] saw there were so many who could benefit, especially those children who were prelingually deaf – to give them language was vital.

"I remember visiting one particular patient who was really struggling to communicate. He invited me to his switch-on. His family, the surgeons and the whole audiology team were there, and when they switched it on, he could hear. He just burst into tears – we all did. It was quite something, a moving experience to see him being able to converse with his family after

eight years. It was clear to me that it was so beneficial, even though some of the Deaf community were resisting it. I respected their views and we didn't take them on."

Within months, other centres in the UK were following suit with their own cochlear implants, and together formed the British Cochlear Implant Group. Lord Jack Ashley, the Labour Peer and himself a recipient of a cochlear implant, took up their cause; eventually the Department of Health agreed to fund a trial to establish their benefits, and NHS funding followed. It had taken several years but the objectives of HEAR had been achieved, and it was a great relief to its committee; Cleary estimates up to 100 implants had been funded.

"The patients at MRI and their families formed the CICADA club, named after the noises heard by the earliest cochlear implant recipients. We funded that for a long time but they're self-funding now. After 28 years we wound HEAR down and we gave £15,000 to CICADA. We also gave £700,000 towards the Richard Ramsden Centre for Auditory Implants at MRI. It was all an interesting journey really, and the people who supported us – it was an honour to be part of it."

It has been fascinating to gain an insight into the vision, motivation and persistence required to translate an advance in medical technology into tangible patient benefit. After establishing such a remarkable legacy,

Cleary and Ramsden remain close friends: "Richard Ramsden was very brave, a pioneer. In the early days there was negativity from parts of the Deaf community, but he knew it was right, and the opposition dwindled with the programme's success. I'm proud to have played some part of it."

Recommended Reading

1. Ramsden RT. History of cochlear implantation. *Cochlear Implants Int* 2013;**14**(Suppl 4):S3-5.
2. Manchester Cicada for Cochlear Implant Patients. www.manchestercicada.org.uk

Last accessed March 2019.

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