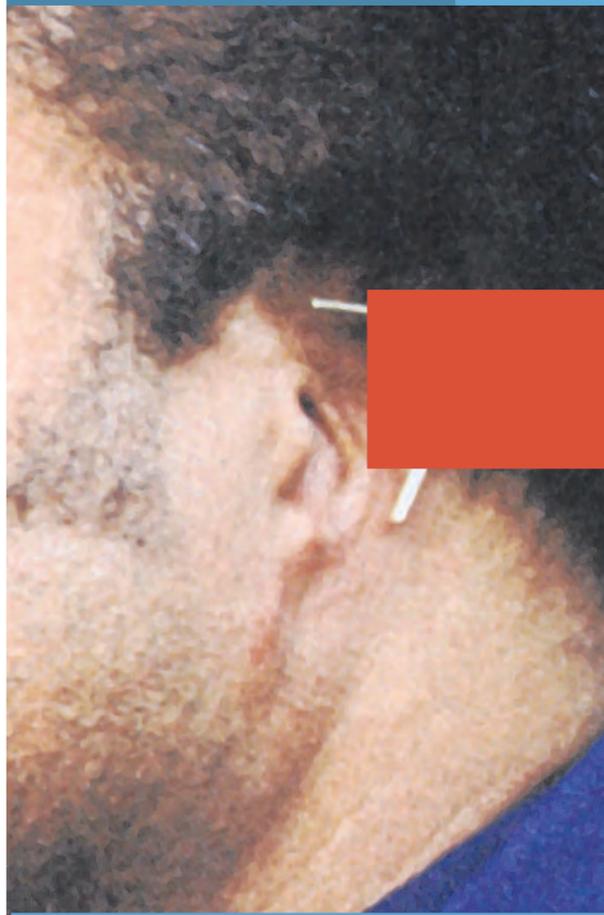
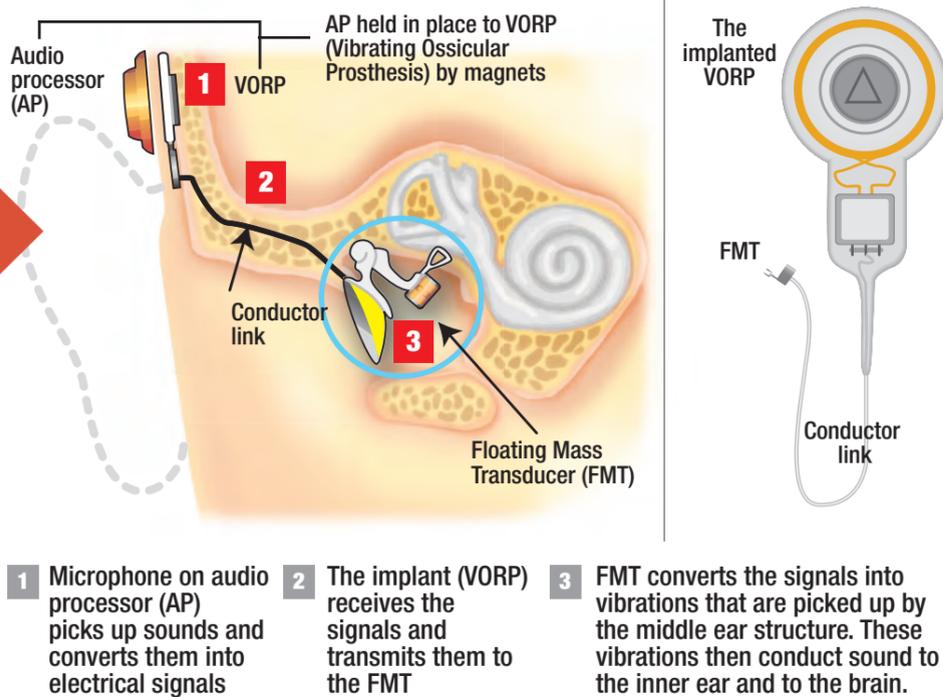


News



HOW IT WAS DONE: Ms Lim's defect is similar to that of this man (left) who has no outer ear. So a hearing device had to be put into her ear (see graphics).

HOW MIDDLE EAR (ME) IMPLANT WORKS



TNP INFOGRAPHICS: LEE HUP KHENG

This helps when hearing aids don't

REPORT: **NG WAN CHING**
wanching@sph.com.sg

FOR years, Serene was an angry woman. Even taking a phone call would drive her mad.

Serene (not her real name), 24, has a birth defect which she hides behind her tresses. She doesn't have an outer right ear and ear canal.

Her left ear, which looks normal, also has 80 per cent hearing loss. But with the help of an hearing aid, she can hear about 40 per cent of its capacity.

In 2006, she decided to have surgery to fit a semi-implantable hearing device.

Today she is a confident woman and an advocate for early medical intervention. While she is not yet confident to have her picture taken, she hopes others like her would seek help rather than bottle up their feelings.

She's the first patient here – missing an outer ear and ear canal – to be implanted with the device. (see graphics).

She said: "I had to lip-read during conversations, but with the device, I could answer people, which is a great convenience when I have to focus on something with my other senses."

She now hears better over the phone and no longer fears answering calls.

Most importantly, her relationship with people has improved. She no longer feels frustrated and moody due to her hearing disability.

Her main fear was that the device would be a failure.

A previous operation to fit fake bones into her auditory system failed.

Said Ms Lim, who works in the accountancy field: "I overcame my fears by researching on the device and learning more about it from my doctor and audiologists. It also helped that I went through many thorough examinations to determine the chances of the operation being a success.

"And, of course, I had a lot of faith in my doctor and trusted her to do her best."

The procedure was done by Associate Professor Lynne Lim, senior consultant at the Ear Nose Throat Department at National University Hospital (NUH).

She's also the director at the Centre of Hearing Intervention and Language Development.

Said Assoc Prof Lim: "Ms Lim was the first person in Asia, who is missing a ear canal and

an outer ear, to be fitted with the semi-implantable middle ear implant hearing device."

The device has improved hearing in Ms Lim's right ear to normal levels.

Over the years, hearing implants have improved even more.

In 2008, Assoc Prof Lim started implanting fully-implantable middle ear implant hearing devices in carefully selected patients.

Since 2006, she has performed more than 10 cases of middle ear implant surgery.

Like Serene, patients have been apprehensive but since last year, enquiries about the hearing devices have tripled.

"Previously, there was a lack of awareness that these implants may be helpful if hearing aids are not possible or sufficient," said Assoc Prof Lim.

MORE ABOUT THE SEMI-IMPLANTABLE DEVICE

THE semi-implantable hearing device has an external processor about the size of a 50-cent coin.

This is hidden under the hair at the side of the head.

A magnet holds the device to the implant that has been placed surgically under the scalp.

The cost for the semi-implantable device starts from \$15,000. The totally implantable device costs \$25,000 upwards.

Those who choose the total implantable device say they want complete freedom during various activities.

They also want the ability to hear 24 hours a day.

The device can be worn during sleep and in the shower too, said Assoc Prof Lynne Lim.

The surgery takes about two to four hours depending on the type of hearing loss and the patient, said Assoc Prof Lim.

The surgery is done under general anaesthesia.

There is no data here on the number of people with absent ear canals and abnormal middle ear.

"This is because most are not reported," said Assoc Prof Lim.

"It is a silent condition in more ways than one."

It is estimated in the US that one in 10 people has hearing loss. About 3 in 1,000 infants are born with serious to profound hearing loss.

Serene said: "Since others around me have a good, if not perfect, sense of hearing, it is hard for them to comprehend how hard it can get for me to hear at times."

There were times when she could hear, but not clearly enough to make out what others were saying.

People can be mean

She said: "It hurts a lot when there are others who take advantage of my hearing disability by saying mean things in front of me, knowing that I would not be able to catch what they were saying."

She found it hard to keep herself motivated.

She added: "I was always putting on a happy front in front of everyone while depression and self-contempt were eating me up."

Now she wants others to learn from her. That early intervention can help.

She said: "For the longest time, I thought there was nothing that could be done to correct my hearing problem until a polyclinic referred me to the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) clinic at NUH."

She is now trying to save enough money to get a hearing implant for her left ear as well.