**Improving Access to Cochlear Implantation: Making a Sound Investment.**

Hearing loss is one of the most challenging health and social issues facing the UK. Being able to communicate defines us and underlies our ability to function in the world: to relate to family, friends and partners, have a job, lead productive lives and maintain our health and wellbeing through social connections. Hearing Loss risks us losing the capacity to do all of these things we take for granted. We can now address hearing loss through world leading technology including hearing aids and cochlear implants but many more people could benefit than currently do.

Unaddressed hearing loss also places untold and mainly unacknowledged burdens on our health service as well as our lives.

**The impact of hearing loss on individual and society**

* In England the costs associated with hearing loss are estimated at £30.13 billion per year, including medical and social costs (Lamb, Archbold, O’Neill, 2016)
* Hearing loss is associated with greater use of medical and social services but increased use of hearing aids and cochlear implants leads to reduced use of health and social care services (O’Neil, Lamb, Archbold 2016)
* Hearing Loss is the number one cause of Years Lost to Disability in those over 70 in Western Europe (Davis 2016)
* Those with severe hearing loss are at five times the risk of developing dementia as those with normal hearing (Lin 2012)
* In older age people with hearing loss are at greater risk of social isolation and reduced mental well-being (Shield 2006)
* Older people with hearing loss are two and half times more likely to experience depression than those without hearing loss (Mathews 2013) and are also at increased risk of major depression (Davis 2011)
* Social isolation has an effect on health (Cohen 1995) and in older people there is a strong correlation between hearing loss and cognitive decline (Lin 2013), mental illness and dementia (Lin 2011) and premature death (Contrera 2015)
* Those with hearing loss have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment (Kochkin 2007, 2010)

**The Benefits of Cochlear Implantation**

“*Early identification and intervention are key actions that should make a real difference in reducing risks and attaining better hearing health outcomes throughout life*”

The Action Plan on Hearing Loss (NHS, 2015)

Today’s hearing technologies offer the opportunity to transform the lives of adults with hearing loss. Hearing aids can make a huge difference to the majority of people, but for those who are severely or profoundly deaf, cochlear implantation offers the only means of hearing spoken language again.

People with hearing loss fitted with cochlear implants describe profound changes to their lives, including greater ability to communicate, less reliance on others for communication support, gaining and retaining employment and increased independence for themselves, with reduced reliance on health and social care services.

“*I feel that so much of my previous life and true self has been restored, regaining my pride and ability to contribute actively in society on an equal basis*.” (Adult with cochlear implants)

The number of people who could benefit from cochlear implants in the UK is significant. There are an estimated 100,000 people with a profound hearing loss and 360,000 with a severe hearing loss who might benefit from implantation at any one time. However, recent figures show that at best only a very small proportion of adults (6.7%) with profound hearing loss are implanted (Raine 2016).

Yet the benefits of cochlear implants have been proven now over many years. These include:

* Cochlear implants have the capacity to make a profound difference to people’s lives, ensuring people can continue to communicate and stay connected at work and socially;
* Cochlear implants also have a dramatic effect on the ability of the individual to retain or gain employment and therefore further reduce reliance on benefits and increase tax contributions;
* Cochlear implants are beneficial across the age range in addressing not just the direct impact of hearing loss but also associated health issues such as dementia and mental health;
* Cochlear Implants help people remain independent for longer saving on social care and other costs;
* Cochlear implants are cost effective on any current cost benefit measure but current studies of cost-effectiveness are likely to be conservative, as the technology is constantly improving and the cost of devices has reduced. (Lamb, Archbold, O’Neill 2016)

**What needs to happen?**

While over 14,000 children and adults now enjoy the advantages of cochlear implants in the UK many more people could benefit. The current NICE guidelines on candidacy are amongst the most conservative in the developed world. Investing in hearing well leads to a reduction in the costs of health, social care and statutory services. If the cost of NOT addressing hearing loss is considered, cochlear implantation is even more cost effective (Lamb, Archbold, O’Neill 2015, 2016).

We cannot afford not to address hearing loss.

To ensure we improve lives and invest to save we need;

* NHS commissioners, NHS Improvement and NHS England to take into account the current overwhelming evidence of the benefits of cochlear implants in improving health and wellbeing and the potential savings over time to health and social care budgets in commissioning decisions;
* Audiologists and ENT professionals to routinely consider if patients could benefit from cochlear implantation
* In line with the Action Plan on Hearing Loss (England) commissioners of health care should look at more innovative models of funding and service delivery including opportunities created by telemedicine, service innovation and new delivery models;
* The National Institute of Clinical Excellence should review its current guidance on candidacy for cochlear implantation to take account of the widening group who could benefit from this life changing technology;
* The National Health Service (NHS), working with the audiology, medical professions and users should develop a targeted programme to promote greater awareness of the benefits of cochlear implants for GPs and other health professionals including the importance of early intervention and integrated planned support;
* Professionals in Audiology and related services have the training and support to ensure that they can properly identify and refer those who could benefit from cochlear implantation.

For more information, advice or guidance on cochlear implantation please contact <http://www.bcig.org.uk/> For more information on the campaign to increase access to Cochlear Implants in England please contact The Action Group on Adult Cochlear Implants, The Ear Foundation. Tel: 0115 942 1985 Email: info@earfoundation.co.uk.

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