



## NICE Reviews Implant Criteria

On 7 March 2019, NICE revised its guidelines on the criteria for cochlear implantation in a publication TA 566. This is the first change that has been made since NICE published, in January 2009, its guidelines, 'Cochlear implants for severe to profound deafness in children and adults'(TA166). Whilst those guidelines were very welcome at that time, eliminating the postal code lottery and funding problems, time has shown just how severe the criteria was; set at a hearing loss of 90 dB it was the highest level anywhere in the world. Rejection levels of potential candidates at implant centres across the UK have been known to reach 35% or more. Implantation levels have grown slowly in the UK and it is estimated that only 7% of those adults who could benefit from a cochlear implant actually get one. The latest figures for the UK are 17098 in total, cumulative over 25 years. For the year 2017/18 alone the figures were 1504 (995 adults and 509 children) whereas far higher levels (up to double or more) have been achieved in Europe and across the world.

Dismayed by this situation, in 2015 AGCI (Action Group for Cochlear Implantation) was formed by leading stakeholders, professional researchers, British Cochlear Implant Group and NCIUA. Led by Professor Brian Lamb, a series of authoritative reports (co- authored by Sue Archbold, The Ear Foundation) were published which were submitted to NICE together with research papers in order to press NICE to consider a review of the key section 1.5 of TA166 concerning cochlear implant candidacy. Pressure was maintained and NICE finally agreed to open a consultation in January 2018 to consider the issues of candidacy criteria. Backed by extensive and telling research from Dr Debi Vickers at UCL and Dr

Padraig Kitterick at the Nottingham Biomedical Research Centre, a complete consensus was agreed by the Group and a full submission made to NICE in July 2019.

NICE accepted all the recommendations so made and have revised the key criteria as follows:

“For the purposes of this guidance, severe to profound deafness is defined as hearing only sounds that are louder than 80 dB HL (pure-tone audiometric threshold equal to or greater than 80 dB HL) at 2 or more frequencies (500 Hz, 1,000 Hz, 2,000 Hz, 3,000 Hz and 4,000 Hz) bilaterally without acoustic hearing aids. Adequate benefit from acoustic hearing aids is defined for this guidance as for adults, a phoneme score of 50% or greater on the Arthur Boothroyd (AB) word test presented at 70 dBA and for children, speech, language and listening skills appropriate to age, developmental stage and cognitive ability.” (The full text of TA 566 can be seen at - <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/TA566/chapter/1-Recommendations>)

The significance of this dramatic development is that by lowering the hearing level test down to 80 dB, NICE have estimated that an extra 1600 more candidates in total will now be successful over the next 5 years. The change in the hearing recognition evaluation from the BKB sentence test to the new AB word test is considered to be a better test of real-world hearing.

This new guidance will be effective from June 2019 and the challenge now for ACIAG is to follow through to ensure that all implant centres expand their resources to give full effect to these new rules.

By Richard Byrnes