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Baby is 'youngest in UK' to have cochlear implants

By Jane Dreaper

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A baby has become the youngest in the UK to have cochlear implants - at the age of three months and three days.

Evie Smith had the first device implanted in her right ear, and then the second one seven weeks later.

Evie is now aged six months - and returned to St Thomas' NHS Hospital in London last week to have the devices activated.

Staff there have emphasised her case is exceptional.

Evie became profoundly deaf after contracting pneumococcal meningitis when she was just three days old.

She spent six weeks in intensive care, and needed to be on a ventilator for a fortnight.

She was given cochlear implants at an exceptionally young age because the meningitis led to bony growth - or ossification - in her inner ear.

The damage to Evie's ears was getting worse, which meant that waiting for implants at a later stage was not an option.

Cochlear implants cannot cure deafness - but they help Evie and children like her experience sound.

'Bad outlook'

Audiological specialists fitted external processors to the outside of Evie's ears - these pick up sound and connect with the internal implants, which help send electrical signals to the brain.

The staff at St Thomas' banged a drum to monitor Evie's responses, as they programmed the processor. Watching her stir as she absorbed the sound meant the world to her parents.

Her mother, Jenny Harvey, 33, from Kent, told me: "When we found out she was deaf, what affected me most was the thought of her speech being impaired.

"But hopefully her speech should be very good - with input from the speech and language therapists.

"We're looking forward to hearing her say mummy and daddy.

"We didn't think we'd get to this stage. The outlook wasn't very good for Evie when she was very ill.

"It's such a relief that she's responding to the implants. It feels as though we're getting some good news now."

Many hospital appointments still lie ahead for Evie - but activating the implants has been a milestone for her parents.

Her father, Barrie Smith, 34, said: "We're hoping that Evie will go to a mainstream school.

"There are some things we still don't know about Evie's longer-term development - she will tell us as she grows older."

'Rich sounds'

Evie is now among around 5,000 children in the UK who have cochlear implants.

Some deaf people are opposed to implants, and believe that deaf children should instead learn to sign and become members of the deaf community.

Katherine Wilson, the principal audiological scientist at St Thomas' Hospital, stressed that Evie had the implants at an exceptionally young age because of the after-effects of her meningitis.

She said: "We had to move very quickly to treat her. The bony growth in the inner ears that she had after meningitis meant we wouldn't have been able to get the implants in later. It just wouldn't have been a possibility.

"The activation process went fabulously well. We never know how young children will react, but Evie showed typical behaviours you'd expect from a baby of her age.

"This will be a long and slow process, with her coming back to hospital many times to have the devices re-programmed.

"We're not trying to cure deafness - this is a way of managing and treating it.

"Implants give these children a different dimension to their life - something they wouldn't otherwise have.

"When Evie has the implants on, she'll be able to pick up on sound and speech, and hear her mum and dad calling her. When the implants are off, she's still a deaf child.

"But because of her young age, she has every chance to develop her speech and language, to be able to communicate with hearing people, and to hear the rich sounds of the world."

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