

S'porean toddler makes medical history with implants in both ears

Mum recalls desperate times:

'We felt helpless, lost'

By Ng Wan Ching

wanching@sph.com.sg

GRIEF, guilt and painful questions kept Madam Julianah Johar company in the months after her only child was born deaf.

Why me? Why my baby?

These were the questions that tortured her when it was confirmed.

This was just two months after her birth.

Madam Julianah, 30, a chemistry teacher in a secondary school, said: "It was a shock.

"We felt helpless and lost."

In those dark days, she stayed slumped on the floor for two weeks, unable to gather any energy to do much except grieve for her child's disability.

But little did she know that her baby, Talia, would make local medical history when she was 10 months old.

Now 1 year old, she became the first baby here to be fitted with cochlear implants in both ears in a single operation.

YOUNGEST PATIENT

She is also the youngest here to be operated on for such a procedure.

And she is one of the first deaf patients to receive the renewed government subsidy for cochlear implants. (See report below.)

The successful operation took place on 12 Dec last year at National University Hospital (NUH).

It was her husband, Mr Astapura Ibrahim, who took the first concrete step to help his daughter.

Madam Julianah said: "One day, he said, 'Get up, I found something on the Internet which can help Talia.' He said it very firmly, so I got up."

Mr Astapura had come across research which pointed to the benefits of bilateral cochlear implants done at the same time.

Mr Astapura, who teaches design and technology at a secondary school, said: "The research said that the results were very good. We felt there was hope for Talia."

There were hurdles: cost, length of surgery (twice as long for both ears compared to one ear) and the fact that no one had undergone a bilateral cochlear implant operation here before.

But the family was determined to help Talia lead a normal life.

They were referred to ear, nose and throat surgeon, Dr Lynne Lim from NUH.

Dr Lim said: "They fought very strongly for their child to get the bilateral implant.

"I was hesitant at first because of the cost, length of surgery and that Talia was only 10 months old at implantation."

Each implant costs between \$35,000 and \$42,000.

But Dr Lim eventually agreed.

"Speech understanding has been shown to be better in research studies that are now being published as bilateral implantation is new compared to unilateral implantation," she said.

The team at NUH evaluates the medical and hearing aspects and also the wishes of the family and their commitment to rehabilitation.

With the extended family support that Talia's parents had from a grandmother and aunt, Dr Lim decided to go ahead with the surgery.

She said: "Research has shown that the cochlear implant does not work if there is no or little follow-up work done with the child in terms of rehabilitation



Picture: CHOO CHWEE HUA

◆ Baby Talia with mum Julianah Johar. (Inset) X-ray of Talia's cochlear implants.

and therapy. The child might as well not have had it."

This is because the implant does not automatically enable the child to hear like a normal person.

After the surgery, she has to go to the hospital once a week to map the sounds across all the frequencies into her implant.

Then she has to be taught day by day what the sounds represent.

FINANCIAL HELP

Financially, Talia's parents received the Ministry of Health subsidy for one implant.

Madam Julianah's mother, Madam Jaaimah Yaacob, a housewife, chipped in with a sizeable amount for the other.

Mr Astapura said: "It is something

that will grow with her and enable her to lead a normal life."

Dr Lim, who is also director, Centre for Hearing Intervention & Language Development, Department of Otolaryngology, Head & Neck Surgery, NUH, said: "Nine in 10 children with hearing impairment are born to parents with normal hearing.

"These parents usually want their child to hear."

Talia's parents definitely do.

Madam Julianah said: "We want to mainstream her, put her in normal schools for her education."

Since Talia's cochlear implants have been switched on for one month, she has not stopped "talking".

Said Dr Lim: "She is responding to what she is hearing. She is making a lot more more sounds now."

Government subsidy for cochlear implant resumed

HEARING impairment is the single most common congenital problem, affecting four in 1,000 newborns.

Two of these four may eventually need a cochlear implant if they become profoundly deaf in both ears.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) subsidy for cochlear implants covers 65 to 80 per cent of the cost of one implant.

Each cochlear implant costs

between \$35,000 and \$42,000.

The subsidies were introduced four years ago as part of the MOH's pilot scheme to evaluate the benefits of such financial help.

It enabled 66 children and 16 adults to get the implants. The scheme ended in March last year and MOH said it needed to review it before deciding whether to continue the subsidy.

It was reinstated in December.

18 Marsiling Lane
#01-255 57330018
Tel/Fax: 6269 8331

rollite
cycles

Your friendly one-stop
bicycle shop. We sell, repair,
tune and help you customise
your bike needs anytime!

106 Yishun Ring Rd
#01-179 5790106
Tel/Fax: 6754 7329

Open daily from 9am to 9pm
Sunday and Public Holidays from 9am to 7pm