



Born deaf, Bryan Chong can now talk to strangers and make himself understood without mother Melinda having to repeat what he says – thanks to a \$30,000 operation on his right. –JEROME MING

Bryan goes to normal school after ear implant

By CHIN SOO FANG

BRYAN Chong, who was born deaf, hated it when his mother, Mrs. Melinda Chong, had to repeat what he said to strangers because nobody could understand what he was saying.

It was worse when even she could not understand, and asked: "Bryan dear, can you repeat yourself?"

But these days, the five-year-old has no trouble making himself understood. His speech has improved after a hearing device was implanted in his right inner ear in 1997.

Not only can other people understand what he says now, he can also carry on a conversation without having to lip-read.

Bryan was a bundle of energy at a public forum on cochlear implants at the Apollo Hotel on Sunday. He kept asking, "Mummy, do you love me?", while his mother was being interviewed.

Asked if he was glad he had the implant, Bryan nodded and said: "Yes, it's nice to hear better."



Dr Low Wong Kein, director of Singapore General Hospital's cochlear implant programme, said about 40 patients here have had the implant since it was introduced two years ago. Of these, 80 per cent were young children.

About 120 deaf babies are born every year in Singapore.

Bryan's parents paid for the \$30,000 operation. Financial aid is given to poor families.

After the implant, the boy's performance in school improved and he was transferred from the Canossian School for the Hearing Impaired to the mainstream Ascension kindergarten. He uses an FM transmitter to pick up his teachers' voices.

He still wears a hearing aid in his left ear because the implant is usually placed in just one ear, usually the worse one.

Ms Julie Kosaner, an educational audiologist with the Canossian School, said he is one of the few to be admitted to a mainstream school after the implant.

"Going to a mainstream school is not a natural progression for those who have had the implant," she told The Straits Times. "Bryan, in this case, is a star."

And he is a "star" because he was diagnosed early, put on hearing aids when he was just nine months old, and had the support of his parents and teachers at the school, she said.

He was also brought up in a normal home and school environment that did not rob him of the chance to recognize sounds and of learning to speak.

Mrs. Chong, 34, chose to work part-time as a department store buyer so that she could spend more time with the boy after his operation.

She said: "I spend about an hour a day to help him identify the different sounds he hears. Sometimes I end up being long-winded because I talk to him so much."

Her husband, an airline cabin crew member, takes their only child out cycling when he is in Singapore.

Mrs. Chong said: "My wish for Bryan is that he will be accepted into a normal secondary school. And I hope he can excel in his studies like some deaf children do."

BONUS: Birdsong

SOME sounds which Bryan can hear now are:

- High-pitched consonants like "f". "s", "sh".

For example, he could not pronounce or make out the word "fish" in the past.

- Birds singing.
- People whistling
- An alarm clock ringing, and other high-pitched and soft sounds.



Cochlear implants give hope to deaf

IN A cochlear implant operation, an electrode is implanted into the cochlea, a part of the inner ear.

This electrode transforms sound signals into nerve impulses that are relayed to the brain.

Patients also need intensive therapy to help them identify the sounds, such as a slamming door.

The operation is most suitable for children who cannot hear even with regular hearing aids.

Adults who become deaf later in life may also be recommended for the operation.

The implant is not for deaf people who have been using sign language as they will have problems adjusting to the sounds after the operation.

The Singapore General Hospital performs the operation, while the Canossian School for the Hearing Impaired trains the patients to speak.

A cochlear implant operation costs about \$50,000. This covers the cost of the implant as well as the therapy, which may stretch for two years.

A fund with about \$500,000 has been set up by SGH and the school to help pay for the operations of needy deaf patients. The money came from a single donation by Indonesian businessman Liem Siow Liong, chairman of the Salim Group.

A medical social worker will assess a patient's financial background before deciding how much aid to give.

Dr Low Wong Kein, director of the cochlear implant programme at the SGH, said about 20,000 patients around the world have gone for cochlear implants since the procedure was introduced more than 20 years ago.

Those who wish to find out more about the operation can call him at 6326-5521.

