

Expanding your services to meet the growing needs of patients

Dr. Joanie Davis AuD, F-AAA, CCC-A

Dr. Joanie Davis is a Board Certified Doctor of Audiology and the owner of Davis Family Hearing, a multiple location practice in the heart of Florida. She regularly recommends Cochlear Implants for appropriate patients and explains her Cochlear Implant journey from hesitation to an enthusiastic recommendation.

Background:

In the US alone, an estimated 1.2 million adults have severe-to-profound hearing loss¹. While some adults have success with hearing aids, there are still many with profound loss who are struggling to find a solution and feel connected. Unfortunately, for those with profound loss, up to 50% of them are dissatisfied with their hearing aids². At Davis Family Hearing, helping patients with their hearing health is the top priority. This left Dr. Joanie Davis with a dilemma – how to better service her patients who did not achieve success with their hearing aids.



How do you think of patients with profound hearing loss?

In many ways patients with profound hearing loss are no different from my other patients – they have come to me asking for help and it is my job to help them. I want to ensure that every patient that walks through my doors walks out happy and with a significantly improved quality of life.

You said your goal for patients with profound hearing loss is the same – to make them happy. How are these patients different?

My goal is always the same, but the treatment options for these patients are often different. It can sometimes be harder to find a hearing aid that works for them and, typically, if they choose a hearing aid option, they are less satisfied with the hearing aids than patients with a mild to moderate loss.

You mentioned hearing aids may not be the best fit for profound hearing loss patients – what solutions have you found?

I had explored just about every hearing aid option out there, but I still felt like I wasn't able to provide my profound hearing loss patients with a satisfactory solution. Now, I recommend cochlear implants (CIs) in my practice, and it's been a great success for us. I feel like I am truly able to offer a solution to everyone.

Did you always offer cochlear implants?

No, I actually did not. I opened my own practice in 2013 and I did not fully appreciate the impact that cochlear

implants could have on the lives of my patients and my practice until 2014.

What made you change your mind?

One patient forever allowed me to fully understand the impact of cochlear implants. To this day, I still see her and it makes me so happy to see how great she is doing. Just shy of 5 years ago, Lizzy came into my office and mentioned that she was interested in a cochlear implant but wanted to try the best possible hearing aids before she made her final decision. I fitted her with hearing aids and offered her a free month-long trial. While this was standard approach for me at the time, I wanted to be sure she didn't feel pressured to settle for a hearing aid and take the time she needed to feel like she had truly exhausted every option. I gave her extra time and saw her for weekly follow-ups, and after two months, she came in and started crying and apologizing to me. She said that she had decided to proceed with a cochlear implant but was upset because I had worked with her so long, and she did not want to have to establish a relationship with another audiologist. It was in that moment that I committed to CIs – I wanted to be confident that I could treat every single patient, no matter how severe their hearing loss. Lizzy received a CI a few months later. It turned out to be life-changing. Lizzy has been doing remarkably well with her implant, and it is wonderful to see. What's more, to this day she is still my patient. I see her regularly and have loved watching her re-engage with her life. Additionally, I am able to offer her a full spectrum of services for her cochlear implant and the hearing aids she still wears on her opposite ear. Lizzy cannot drive long distances, so it is priceless for her to have all of the care that she needs only a 10 minute drive from her home.

What was your biggest misconception about cochlear implants?

I thought that cochlear implants were highly technical and very complicated to learn. When I went through school, there were no courses on cochlear implants, so my exposure was pretty minimal. In my mind, cochlear implants became this nearly mystical device that was just too cumbersome to tackle. Now I look back and laugh at all of that – reality is they can be as simple as hearing aids, fewer items to adjust overall, very straight forward, and with plenty of support.

¹ <https://www.audiology.org/news/incidence-severe-and-profound-hearing-loss-united-states-and-united-kingdom>

² http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S1808-86942013000500555&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en



How have cochlear implants impacted your business?

First and foremost, I really enjoy the relationship and the journey that I get to experience with each one of my patients who have a cochlear implant. These patients are near and dear to my heart, as you are able to see a transformation in them as they move from frustrated and unable to hear to rediscovering what life has to offer.

As for the business aspect, at first I feared that recommending implants might negatively affect my business because cochlear implants frequently require more follow-up care and have a lower reimbursement rate than hearing aids. I have found the reality to be the exact opposite. I work in an increasingly competitive market and recommending a cochlear implant helps me to differentiate my business. There are plenty of hearing aid specialists in my area, but very few audiologists that are comfortable with cochlear implants. In fact, I would even go as far as to say that CIs have expanded the reach of my business. We have found that offering CI services has increased the distance people are willing to drive to our practice. What is better than being able to reach a larger number of patients who desperately need your expertise and services?

Also, word of mouth referrals have increased exponentially. We started offering cochlear implant services at the end of 2014, and in the three years after we started recommending cochlear implants Davis Family Hearing grew 30%. My cochlear implant patients are among my biggest advocates and are eager to refer their friends to me, many of which are hearing aid candidates!

Would you have been able to grow that much without cochlear implants?

Absolutely not. Cochlear implants have helped to establish Davis Family Hearing as the hearing healthcare expert in the area, and most importantly, have allowed us to give people hope who otherwise didn't have any. We have improved so many people's quality of life; not just the patient who is struggling with hearing loss, but also, the spouse, the friend, the family, and the co-workers who interact with that patient. Every time we activate a cochlear implant, the audiologists at Davis Family Hearing are able to witness a miracle.

About how many new patients do you think you get every year because of your approach to cochlear implants?

We easily schedule 200 cochlear implant evaluation appointments a year; however, that does not encompass new patients who schedule as new evaluations who turn in to cochlear implant candidates. Also, when someone sees that we offer cochlear implants, a lot of patients schedule a hearing aid evaluation or a tinnitus evaluation based on the level of expertise that is demonstrated by being a cochlear implant provider.

What do you enjoy most about working with CIs?

That's a really good question, and I wish I could narrow it down to one thing. It is priceless to participate in such a pivotal event in someone's life. Being able to offer such a dramatic improvement in quality of life to a patient who has been so frustrated for such a long time is an extremely rewarding experience. Next, I really enjoy learning. So much is changing in the hearing healthcare field, and I love being on the cutting edge of technology. Last, CIs have really helped elevate my practice.

Patient acquisition can be tough these days, don't you worry that referring a patient for a CI means giving them away?

Not at all. Referring a patient for a cochlear implant does not mean I am giving them away. Instead, it means that I'm creating a lifelong customer and an advocate. While I don't handle the actual cochlear implant surgery, I support every other facet. This means that I manage their initial stimulation, their follow-up appointments, any programming and adjustments and even the initial cochlear implant recommendation before referring them for surgery. The only part of the cochlear implantation process I do not perform is the surgery, which means these patients view me as their primary hearing doctor. Secondly, referring to local CI surgeons has increased my referral base. Because we have such a great relationship with the CI surgeons, they are very willing to refer their patients to us in order to reduce the patient's drive. Lastly, many patients will continue to wear a hearing aid unilaterally.

What would you suggest to an audiologist who is considering taking the first steps towards recommending cochlear implants, but is unsure?

Stop hesitating and give it a try. The return on this investment is more than worth it and you will never look back or regret the leap. The satisfaction of being part of the process to help patients who have been struggling with their hearing for so long finally thrive is incredibly rewarding.

The Continuum of Care ensures that patients receive the care best suited to treat their unique hearing loss. The Cochlear Provider Network (CPN) connects independent dispensing audiology/ audiology ENT practices dedicated to treating hearing loss with surgeons who are interested in raising hearing implant awareness. Sycle supports hearing healthcare providers in providing care that maximizes a patient's hearing experience. To learn more about The Continuum of Care and The Cochlear Provider Network, call: 888.881.7925

