



Review Article

Electrode selection for hearing preservation in cochlear implantation: A review of the evidence



Jason A. Brant*, Michael J. Ruckenstein

Department of Otorhinolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

Received 14 July 2016; accepted 10 August 2016
Available online 24 November 2016

KEYWORDS

Electrode;
Length;
Hearing preservation;
Cochlear
implantation

Abstract *Objective:* To review and assess the ideal length of electrode in cochlear implant patients for hearing preservation.

Methods: The English language literature was reviewed for studies including hearing preservation and speech understanding for electrodes of different lengths.

Results: One prospective trial was found, and there were no studies that randomized patients into different length electrodes with an intent to preserve hearing. Eight studies total included multiple length electrodes and contained data regarding hearing preservation.

Conclusions: Although there is some evidence that indicates that shorter electrodes may improve both short and long-term hearing preservation rates in cochlear implant patients, no study has directly compared implant length on hearing preservation in a similar patient population. A randomized trial of short and standard length electrodes for hearing preservation is warranted. In the interim, utilization of current electrodes measuring 20–25 mm could seem to be a prudent approach when seeking to preserve residual hearing without unduly compromising cochlear coverage.

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* Corresponding author. 3400 Spruce St., 5th Floor Silverstein Building, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. Fax: +1 215 662 4515.
E-mail address: jason.brant@uphs.upenn.edu (J.A. Brant).
Peer review under responsibility of Chinese Medical Association.



Introduction

With improvements in cochlear implant technology and surgical techniques, patients are being implanted with increasing amounts of residual hearing. It is widely accepted that patients with sufficient residual hearing to allow for both electric and acoustic amplification perform better than those using electric-only stimulation.¹

Hearing loss can occur at the time of surgery due to physical damage, as well as over time secondary to a chronic inflammatory response.^{2,3} A significant amount of research has been conducted to address the hearing impact at the time of surgery, and to determine the best electrodes and surgical techniques to maximize the amount of residual hearing following implantation.

Some have advocated the use of shortened electrodes to reduce cochlear damage at the time of surgery as they would theoretically cause less damage to the healthy (low frequency) portion of the cochlea, and in fact several electrodes have been produced specifically for this reason. The use of shortened electrodes, however raises several issues. For example, the patient is a candidate for implantation due a significant, and most likely progressive, hearing loss. There is no reason to suspect that implantation would arrest whatever process has caused the hearing loss.

Therefore, even if the surgery and subsequent foreign body reaction caused no additional losses, the patient's hearing might continue to deteriorate to the point that bimodal amplification was no longer possible. In fact, it has been shown that ipsilateral progressive hearing loss is common following implantation and progresses faster than it would be expected to without implantation.^{4,5} At this point, a patient would be relying entirely on electrical stimulation and there is evidence to suggest that patients who have lost their residual hearing perform less well with a shorter electrode.⁶ Another study looked at outcomes following reimplantation with a standard length electrode after initial implantation with a shortened electrode and found improved speech understanding outcomes.⁷

The first electrodes designed specifically for hearing preservation were based on the Nucleus CI-24, included 6 electrodes, and were designed in 6 mm and 10 mm lengths.⁸ More recent hearing preservation electrodes include the FLEX series by Med-El, and the Hybrid L24 by Cochlear Corporation.⁹ The FLEX electrodes come in lengths from 20 to 31.5 mm, all have 19 electrodes with the distal electrodes unpaired to allow for a narrow, more flexible tip. The L24 is 16 mm long with optimal insertion angle of 250° and contains 22 electrodes. The Cochlear CI422/522 electrode is a 25 mm slim-straight electrode with 22 electrodes designed to minimize damage to intracochlear structures during insertion via the round window technique. This electrode can be fully or partially inserted.

This study aims to review the available literature on both hearing preservation and audiological outcomes based on electrode length in cochlear implantation of patients with residual hearing.

Methods

The English language literature was searched for articles reporting hearing preservation outcomes following cochlear implantation. The primary articles of interest were those that reported outcomes from electrodes of different lengths in a single study.

Results

There was only one prospective trial found, and there were no studies that randomized patients into different length electrodes with an intent to preserve hearing. The studies below represent those where comparison of electrodes of different lengths could be made.

Most recently, Suhling et al¹⁰ investigated the hearing preservation rates with three different lengths of the Med-El Thin Flexible Electrode Array (TFEA): 20, 24, and 28 mm. Although hearing preservation rates were worse with increasing length of the electrode, the choice of electrode length was not randomized: "Subjects with normal low-frequency hearing thresholds received a short electrode in our study. Subjects with moderate to severe low-frequency HL received a longer electrode". Median hearing loss was 17.5, 20, and 24 dB for the TFEA20, TFEA24, and TFEA28, respectively at activation versus pre-operative testing. Additionally, hearing loss was stable at one year for the TFEA20 and TFEA24, but increased to 32.5 dB for the TFEA28. The percentage of patients that remained in the "good hearing preservation" group (<15 dB hearing loss) was 48.8%, 50%, and 15.8% at one year for the TFEA20, TFEA24, and TFEA28, respectively.

A 2015 study by Friedmann et al⁶ found that there was a significant improvement in the rates of hearing preservation for subjects receiving the Cochlear L24 electrode versus the CI422 (70% vs 42%). However, in those subjects that lost residual hearing, there were much better speech understanding scores in the CI422 group (72% vs 15%).

A 2014 paper compared the hearing preservation outcomes of the Cochlear Hybrid L24 and the CI422 electrodes in 197 patients.¹¹ Subjects were not randomized between electrodes, but were assigned based on residual hearing present at the time of evaluation for implantation. Patients with the shorter L24 electrode showed decreased initial change in hearing as well as more stable hearing over time. The percentage of subjects with <15 dB hearing loss increased from 56.9% to 58.8% for the L24, and 21.4% to 28.6% for the CI422 group between activation and 24 months follow-up. However, the percentage of subjects with >30 dB hearing loss increased from 9.8% to 23.3% for the L24 group, and from 25.0% to 39.3% for the CI422 group over the same time period.

Cosetti et al¹² retrospectively reported all subjects at a single center that were implanted with any preoperative detectable hearing. Electrodes included the Nucleus Freedom and 512 as well as the Advanced Bionics HiFocus 1J with reportedly full insertions in all cases. An overall hearing preservation rate of 29% was found, however no correlation was found between residual hearing and speech understanding testing. Electrode type was not predictive of

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