

Life of a Surgeon

ELLIS DOUEK

A conversation with one of the pioneers of hearing implants



Dr. Ellis Douek is a British cochlear implant pioneer and Emeritus Consultant ENT Surgeon at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and Royal Society of Medicine. He founded the Hearing and Language Clinic at Guy's Hospital and was the UK Representative to the European Commission on Industrial Deafness. He has over 60 years of experience as a surgeon and was one of the first to work on developing a cochlear implant (bionic ear) for the totally deaf. He was also the first to monitor the hearing of a baby at birth and the first to show a prolongation of the latency in multiple sclerosis. He received the Dalby Prize of the Royal Society of Medicine for his research on hearing. He participated in the development of a middle ear device for the restoration of hearing that now bears his name: Douek-MED™.

I became a doctor because... from quite early on I had developed an underlying wish to help people and the doctors I knew and those in films and books seemed to do this. I kept wanting to do different things like becoming a research scientist, a writer, even an artist (I briefly attended art classes at St Martin's School of Art and was taught by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi) but then I decided to study medicine. In the end, to some extent, I managed to do a little of all these things.

I chose to work in Ear, Nose & Throat (ENT) because... by the time I had qualified as a doctor I yearned to understand the function of the brain, the mind, even the soul but I showed an aptitude to work with my hands and I could earn a living that way. As an ENT surgeon, I could do this while studying most of the senses. At first, I studied smell and taste, but most of my work was related to hearing, deafness, and balance and that led to speech and language development and the voice. I am not sure how much of the mind, much less the soul, I came to understand but the surgical skills I acquired certainly helped many children and adults.

The story of my pioneering hearing implants started... in my teens, around 1950, when I was taken to see the first such case ever in Paris by a great surgeon who was caring for my brother. Later, when I was approached by the Minister of Health, it all came back to me.

My work as Head of the Hearing and Language Clinic at Guy's Hospital involved... the diagnosis of children who, for one reason or another, had failed to develop speech. Unless surgery was required, which I did myself, the care was taken on by other members of my team. I was able to develop a way to test the hearing of babies objectively and I was the first person to do this immediately when a baby was born. It was wonderful to say that he could hear normally and we opened a bottle of champagne! Such tests are now done routinely and no one is even aware that it happens at all unless there is something wrong. Working with developmental paediatricians, speech pathologists, audiologists, teachers, and social workers broadened my knowledge, indeed enriched my life and I learned an enormous amount, maybe even a little about the soul, after all.

Life as a retired surgeon means that... I have had the chance to reflect on what I have experienced and write something about it all.

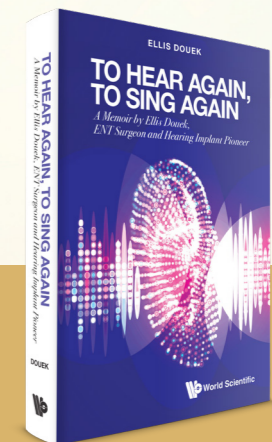
The biggest misconception about deafness is that... cure is all or nothing. We can do something for pretty much everyone.

A major challenge in treating deafness is... the cost which excludes the poorer parts of the world from what we can offer.

The popular opinion that "doctors run the hospital" is... no longer tenable as too many skills are involved. But doctors should be in charge of what they do.

I wrote my second memoir *To Hear Again, To Sing Again* because... I felt that I had learned so much, about so many aspects of life, that it would be a pity if it was all simply forgotten and no one would ever know about it.

To the young who wish to pursue a career in medicine I would say... there are so many exciting things happening in medicine now that I wish I could start all over again with my grandchildren's generation. **APBN**



Ellis Douek is the author of *To Hear Again, To Sing Again: A Memoir by Ellis Douek, ENT Surgeon and Hearing Implant Pioneer*, published by World Scientific. It sheds light on the life of a surgeon from the early days of the UK National Health Service and contains sensational, no-holds-barred tales of his interactions from ordinary patients to well-known singers, kings, emperors and dictators. Pre-order the book at <https://worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/12811>.