
St. Louis Children's Hospital Celebrates Cochlear Implant Milestone

Party marks 500th Cochlear Implant and a special balloon ride for a 6-year-old patient

ST. LOUIS, September 20, 2008 — The sights and sounds of the Great Forest Park Balloon Race had special meaning this year for children treated at St. Louis Children's Hospital for severe to profound hearing problems. Patients, families, medical and hospital staff celebrated a surgical milestone – the 500th Pediatric Cochlear Implant that occurred this past spring, making the hospital's Cochlear Implant Program one of the largest and most successful in the region.

More than 200 people attended the Cochlear Implant party, featuring a special appearance by the hospital's "Clown Docs," costumed characters, therapy "touch dogs" and music therapists. The food, music, and family activities continued until the balloon launch, when 6-year old Allison Albright and her father Joe boarded the St. Louis Children's Hospital balloon and launched into the sky for a spectacular bird's eye view of the city.

Allison, a first-grader who wears a cochlear implant, won a ride in the St. Louis Children's Hospital hot air balloon. "She was so excited, she can't stop talking about going up in the balloon," her mother Laura Albright said. "The party was also a great chance to meet with other parents and kids who have been through our same challenges in overcoming hearing problems." Allison has Pendred's Syndrome, which causes progressive hearing loss in both her ears.

The Albrights, who live in Columbia, Missouri, have been coming to St. Louis for treatment and have been working with therapists from the Moog School in Columbia since Allison was diagnosed at age one. Families like the Albrights come to St. Louis for top pediatric medical care and for the educational expertise of three internationally-recognized schools for children with hearing loss – Moog Center for Deaf Education, Central Institute for the Deaf (CID), and St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf.

"These institutions help make St. Louis a 'mecca' for the evaluation and treatment of children with hearing loss," says Dr. Timothy Hullar, an otolaryngologist with St. Louis Children's Hospital. "Parents seeking treatment should also consider an experienced pediatric medical program that takes a team approach – where the surgeons, audiologists, researchers, speech pathologists, social workers and other support staff work closely together with the child and his family. That comprehensive team makes a major difference in a child's outcome and a family's experience."

What are cochlear implants?

Cochlear implants are electronic replacements for damaged cells in the inner ear. Unlike hearing aids, which amplify sounds to enable a person to hear, cochlear implants use a microphone and mini-computer to help convert everyday sounds into coded electrical pulses. These pulses stimulate the auditory nerve and the brain interprets the pulses as sound. The brain receives sound information so quickly that sounds are heard as soon as they occur. An otolaryngologist, or ear, nose and throat specialist, implants the cochlear device in a surgical procedure.