

Book Review

Cochlear Implants in Children: Ethics and Choices

John B. Christiansen and Irene W. Leigh (2002)

Gallaudet University Press: Washington, D.C.

Cochlear Implants. These two words have caused more turmoil in the field of deafness than anything since the infamous Milan Conference of 1880. A simple audiological prosthesis, frequently likened to an internal hearing aid, has caused anguish and angst among deaf and hearing alike. The debate over whether young children should be implanted consumes advocates on both sides of the controversy as each shrilly denounces the other with fervor usually reserved for sawdust-trail evangelists announcing the impending apocalypse. Those who believe that implants are the salvation of deaf people view people who oppose the procedure as child abusers. On the other hand, individuals who oppose implants see proponents as promoting a diabolical plot to eliminate Deaf Culture, only slightly less evil than Hitler's holocaust.

The documentary, *Sound and Fury*, has only fueled the fires. Media outlets tend to take sensationalist views printing stories about the "miracle cases" with little exposure to the work required to habilitate the implantee. Nor has the "common experience" been given much exposure in the press. The daily experience of parents and children, leading what Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation" do not make compelling stories for a medium driven by the sensational, by the incredible, or by the horrific.

Into this environment step Leigh and Christiansen. Their book, *Cochlear Implants in Children: Ethics and Choices*, attempted to cut through the miasma of misinformation, disinformation and hyperbole presenting fact devoid of emotionalism and extravagance. They strived to present information from research and from the anecdotal experience of those who have been there, for better or for worse. For the most part, they accomplish this goal in spades.

Christiansen and Leigh were interested in exploring why parents made the choices that they did. They examined the underlying assumptions that guided parents in their decision making. Equally important, Christiansen and Leigh looked at the unintended consequences of those decisions.

Data for the book was obtained in several ways, all of which are detailed in the introduction. Noteworthy is that qualitative data was obtain through interviews with 56 families. This data was then arranged in a highly useful, readable way. Through it all, they carefully avoid taking sides or expressing any particular bias. They do not gloss over the controversy, however. Indeed, it is presented in all its disturbing reality.

The practicing clinician who must deal with families in the cusp of this difficult decision yearns for some direction. Robert Pollard gave a good overview of pre-operative psychological assessment in his essential 1996 article *Conceptualizing and conducting preoperative psychological assessment on cochlear implant candidates* (Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 1, 16 – 28). Dr. Pollard's outstanding work is vital to clinicians working with adults and older children considering an implant. It didn't, however, give the clinician working with very young children and their families much guidance on doing a preoperative assessment – at least not overtly. Unfortunately, neither did Leigh and Christiansen. Such criticism takes on the characteristic of nitpicking, however, since the thoughtful reader can glean more than enough from the anecdotal information to conceptualize an effective screening based on realistic expectations. And being able to filter out the gems from the dross is at the core of effective work with preoperative clients. More importantly, Christiansen and Leigh challenge the reader to put aside their own biases and develop empathy for the parents as they wrestle with the decision of whether to implant their child or not. As the authors quote, *"If you haven't walked in my shoes, don't judge me. And the professionals hadn't walked in my shoes. They chose deafness, I didn't."* (p.319.) Regardless of the other strengths of this book, which are considerable, the compelling reason to read this work is the degree to which the authors help us "walk in the shoes" of the parents.

It is unlikely that this book will sway the extremists on either side of the debate. This was not the authors' goal, however. It will give the thoughtful reader a good overview of cochlear implantation and hopefully will open the door to more reasoned consideration of practical outcomes. For this, we are much richer for their contribution.

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