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Australia-based implantable hearing solutions provider Cochlear in 2015 roped in former Australian fast bowler and cricket icon Mr Brett Lee as its global hearing ambassador for its campaign 'Sounds of Cricket', aimed at raising awareness about hearing loss around the world.

On April 11, 2016, Mr Lee was in Bangalore addressing the media fellows for this cause.

The campaign emphasizes raising awareness of impact of hearing loss at functional, social, emotional and economical levels.

Mr Lee had a personal story to tell behind this ambassadorship.

"My son had a head injury some time ago, and suffered hearing loss. But it came back naturally," said the ace cricketer.

Globally 360 million people suffer from hearing loss ranging from moderate to severe to profound.

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About 32 million of these are children under 15 years and 328 million are adults.

According to WHO, 60% of hearing loss in children under 15 is preventable.

India has 50 lakh patients suffering from severe hearing loss, and 2.35 lakh of them are in Karnataka.

Hearing aids is said to only amplify sounds. Cochlear implants, however, stimulate cochlear nerve endings signaling information to the brain.

Hearing loss is attributed to infections, birth defects, aging process, head or ear injuries, ototoxic reactions to drugs, and exposure to excessive noise.

Can a person with cochlear implants play the game? "Cricket is all about sound.You can play any sport and feel comfortable with cochlear implants. You can get back your normal and productive life. Playing deaf is very difficult, but one can surely play after receiving the implants," voiced Mr Lee.

According to Mr Lee, the implant not only enables people to hear but it also builds self-confidence and worthiness in an individual.

"There are psychological benefits that goes along with it. Children especially will be able to go to normal schools," he added.

He feels that every child in India should mandatorily undergo universal new-born hearing screening. "These screenings regularly happen In Australia and in countries all across the world. India has to implement it soon. This makes early intervention possible and identifying hearing loss at birth," Mr Lee stressed.

ENT specialist Dr Shankar Medikeri, who is also the president of Cochlear Implant Group of India (CIG), added similar suggestions. "Hearing evaluations should be mandatorily included in the pediatric vaccination schedule. The tests done for screening are so simple. It would just need equipments worth Rs 2 lakh. Once the tests are done, the results are printed showing whether the individual passed or failed it."

Post cochlear implantation, patients are taken through a few months of speech language trainings.

Cochlear implants have two parts: One implanted inside the body and the other - a speech processor - worn behind the ear.

Implants vary in their features. Price range varies depending on those features.

A basic-featured cochlear piece cost Rs 5.5 to 6 lakh. The top-end model having all the features would be about Rs 12 to 12.5 lakh.

"Cochlear implantation is cheaper than a kidney transplantation or bypass surgery. It's a one-time, lifetime investment," Dr Medikeri pointed.

Large gap exists in receiving cochlear implantations mainly because of cost of the implant, lack of awareness, unavailability of highly specialized medical professionals and surgeons, and feeble initiatives by the State and Central Governments.

Initially, NGOs came forward and took initiatives in formulating hearing loss programs.

"This was later picked up by various State Governments. Andhra Pradesh led the way followed by Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and also Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh in the North. Karnataka is still yet to start a program. This should start at primary healthcare centres and done at national level. There are programs happening but are not completely maturing," Dr Medikeri revealed.

When *BioSpectrum* asked if the use of mobile phones cause any damage to the cochlear implants, Chief Audiologist and Speech Language Pathologist Ms Rashmi Deshpande opined, "Mobile phones does not interfere with cochlear implant's functions."

Cochlear invests more than AUS $100 million in its R&D annually.

"Rather than focusing on the cost, we want the Government to get behind it, and there are individuals who can sponsor or assist in getting implants," Mr Lee highlighted.