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## The Gift Of Hearing After 12 Years Of Waiting

By Hazlinda Hamzah

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 15 (Bernama) -- A. Nithiya Priya, 12, sat next to her mother, N. Pugunaswary, listening to her mother's words attentively.

Pugunaswary was telling the writer about Nithiya's ability to hear now and how hard she had worked to bring melodious sounds to her daughter's ears.

For the past 12 years, Nithiya had been living in a silent world due to a congenital hearing defect. She could neither hear nor speak.

"I am happy that my daughter is able to call me 'Ama' (mother in Tamil) now. Nithiya underwent a surgery earlier. That's why she is able to speak a little. I hope Nithiya will speak more in the future," said Pugunaswary emotionally, wiping her tears at the same time.

Pugunaswary only realised that her daughter could not hear when she did not learn to speak like other growing up toddlers.

"I took Nithiya to an audiology department and a doctor informed me that she was not able to hear. I am very grateful to my employer; he supported me financially and emotionally. He lifted my spirits and boosted my morale," she said.

Pugunaswary, a single mother, who never gave up on her daughter's fate, resides in Selayang and works in Kuala Lumpur. Nithiya is Pugunaswary's eldest child and she has two other sons.

### SURGERY

Nithiya had successfully undergone a cochlea implant surgery at Gleneagles Kuala Lumpur in 2012.

Nithiya was born in March 2000. She could hear very little with one of her ears. She could not hear anything with her other ear.

Nithiya was initially found to be the least ideal candidate for a cochlea implant surgery due to her age.

Usually, people who undergo the cochlea implant surgery are below the age of two. However, Nithiya was 12 years old at the time of her surgery.

However, Dr Arasa Raj Sinnathuray, an Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) surgeon and a consultant, was keen on performing the cochlea implant surgery on one of Nithiya's ears and the use of a hearing aid in the other.

"Most of the children with similar hearing problems can hear very little with one of their ears. They are unable to hear with their other ear. Nithiya's hearing problem is similar to the problems faced by other children. The cause of her hearing disability is unknown. It could be hereditary," he explained.

Nithiya was diagnosed with bilateral profound deafness - inability to hear with two ears.

Since Nithiya was unable to hear at a very young age, she was unable to speak too. Therefore, for 12 years, she hardly heard or spoke. She never attended school too.

"Nithiya is definitely making progress. She is currently undergoing rehabilitation, including speech and language therapy, at Gleneagles Kuala Lumpur.

"Plans to attend school for the first time in her life are on the cards," Dr Arasa said.

### COPING WELL

The successful surgery has given Nithiya the opportunity to lead a meaningful life.

She is coping well in a new environment where every activity has a sound attached to it.

"I am thankful to Dr Arasa. I owe a lot to him. In fact, he performed the

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surgery free of cost. Dr Arasa has given my child the best gift ever - the ability to hear," Pugunaswary expressed her gratitude in such an emotional manner that Nithiya stood up to wipe her mother's tears.

"Nithiya goes to a kindergarten and a day care centre. She can now spell and read words. I have been teaching her a number of words since November 2012. My daughter enjoys going to her kindergarten," said Nithiya's mother.

How did Nithiya react when she heard numerous sounds for the first time?

"She was happy after putting on her hearing aid. She was fascinated by the sounds on streets.

"She wanted to hear all kinds of sounds on streets," Pugunaswary added as she stroked her daughter's hair.

## **COST**

A surgery as complicated as a cochlea implant surgery comes with a hefty price tag.

According to Dr Arasa, implants cost about RM70,000 in a government hospital and the surgery costs another RM5,000.

"In private hospitals, the total cost would be around RM120,000. I helped Nithiya because I knew her family did not have sufficient funds to pay for the surgery.

"I requested an implant company and the hospital's CEO to reduce the cost of the surgery. I told them that I would be performing the surgery free of cost," the surgeon added.

Pugunaswary then told Bernama that she had sought medical advice and help from foreign hospitals to rectify her daughter's hearing problem.

"Seven years ago, the cost of the surgery was RM80,000," the single mother lamented.

There are three different kinds of surgeries that can correct hearing disorders - the cochlear implant, the 'BAHA' or Bone Anchored Hearing Aid implant, and laser surgeries.

An implant is needed to correct severe to profound deafness as well as conductive deafness, which occurs because of a defect in the external canal or the middle ear.

## **WAITING LIST**

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of deaf children and adults in Malaysia. In addition, the waiting list for surgeries is getting longer.

At the University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC), children with hearing defects who need to undergo corrective surgery have to wait for at least four months.

Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has the most advanced infrastructure in the country to deal with hearing needs and audio-related matters.

Today, there are a number of funds available for children if they need implants or surgeries.

According to Dr Arasa, the success rate of ear-related surgeries is quite high.

## **NITHIYA LOOKS FORWARD TO LIFE**

Nithiya is fortunate to have undergone the corrective surgery despite at a late stage.

Just before saying goodbye, the writer had the opportunity to hear Nithiya say, "Ama, book", in a slightly slurred voice as she picked up a magazine from a table nearby.

Nithiya's ability to hear has brought happiness to her family. With the availability of funds, technology, and medical aid, there is hope for children all over the world who have hearing disorders.

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