

NETWORK UPDATE

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VA Midwest
Health Care Network
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Cochlear Implants Now Offered in Minneapolis to VA Patients with Profound Hearing Loss

MINNEAPOLIS, MN – For many years, Minneapolis VA veterans with significant hearing loss who no longer benefit from hearing aids would travel to the Iowa City VA to obtain a cochlear implant.

The implant surgery, which typically lasts two to three hours, would be followed by regular clinic visits - sometimes as many as six a year - to adjust the device. Travel and access to care posed a hardship for Minneapolis VA patients.

Earlier this year, the Veterans Health Administration's National Surgery Office approved a cochlear implant program at the Minneapolis VA. Only about 40 programs exist in the VA system with the closest being Iowa City or Seattle VA.

On November 29, the first patient, Korean War veteran Douglas Heinrich of Rush City, MN had his device activated, meaning that the electrical stimulator imbedded in the skull was receiving electrical signals to the ear. The implant surgery was performed weeks earlier by Samuel Levine, MD, a neurosurgeon in the ENT Department at the Minneapolis VA.

"Cochlear implants have been my passion coming into my career," said Dr. Jerrica Rieger, Minneapolis VA audiologist and head of the new program. "Finding out this service was not offered here is what ignited me to bring this service to our veterans."

Dr. Rieger, who came to the VA three years ago after completing her residency/clinical externship at the Cleveland Clinic, was the driving force behind the VA application. Successful management of the implant involves the inter-disciplinary collaboration of audiologists, otolaryngologists, primary care physicians, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, vestibular specialists, and other professionals.

Cochlear implantation is not an immediate cure. It can take many months, and numerous clinic follow-up visits, to properly "map" the new electric signal to the brain.



Samuel Levine, MD, ENT surgeon, Dr. Jerrica Rieger, audiologist, and the first Minneapolis patient, Douglas Heinrich. (VA Photo by April Eilers)

Patients can achieve up to 60 to 70% of hearing function with the device. Cochlear implants are considered the most successful prosthetic sensory device for restoration of function in the history of medicine. But Dr. Rieger cautions there is no "typical" case and, sometimes, the benefit is minimal.

(This story was written by Ralph Heussner, Minneapolis VA Public Affairs Officer and previously published in their monthly newsletter.)

MyVA311: One number to call to reach VA

When VA Secretary Bob McDonald first started evaluating business and customer service practices across VA to improve the Veteran experience, the need for a revamped phone system was clear. Instead of navigating dozens of automated phone trees with no guarantee of success, Veterans needed one place to call to get connected to the right place quickly

VA is introducing 1-844-MyVA311 (1-844-698-2311) as a go-to source for Veterans and their families who don't know what number to call. This new national toll-free number will help eliminate the feeling of frustration and confusion that Veterans and their families have expressed when navigating the 1000-plus phone numbers that currently exist.

With 1-844-MyVA311, Veterans, their families and caregivers can access information about VA services like disability, pension, healthcare eligibility, enrollment, and burial benefits, in addition to a self-service locator to find the nearest VA facility. And if they're looking for immediate assistance with housing or are having a mental health crisis, MyVA311 will route callers to the Homeless Veteran help line and the Veterans Crisis Line.

If you know what number you're calling – keep calling it. None of the existing VA numbers will go away. The future vision is that 1-844-MyVA311 will become a 24/7 one-stop information service platform for all VA services.

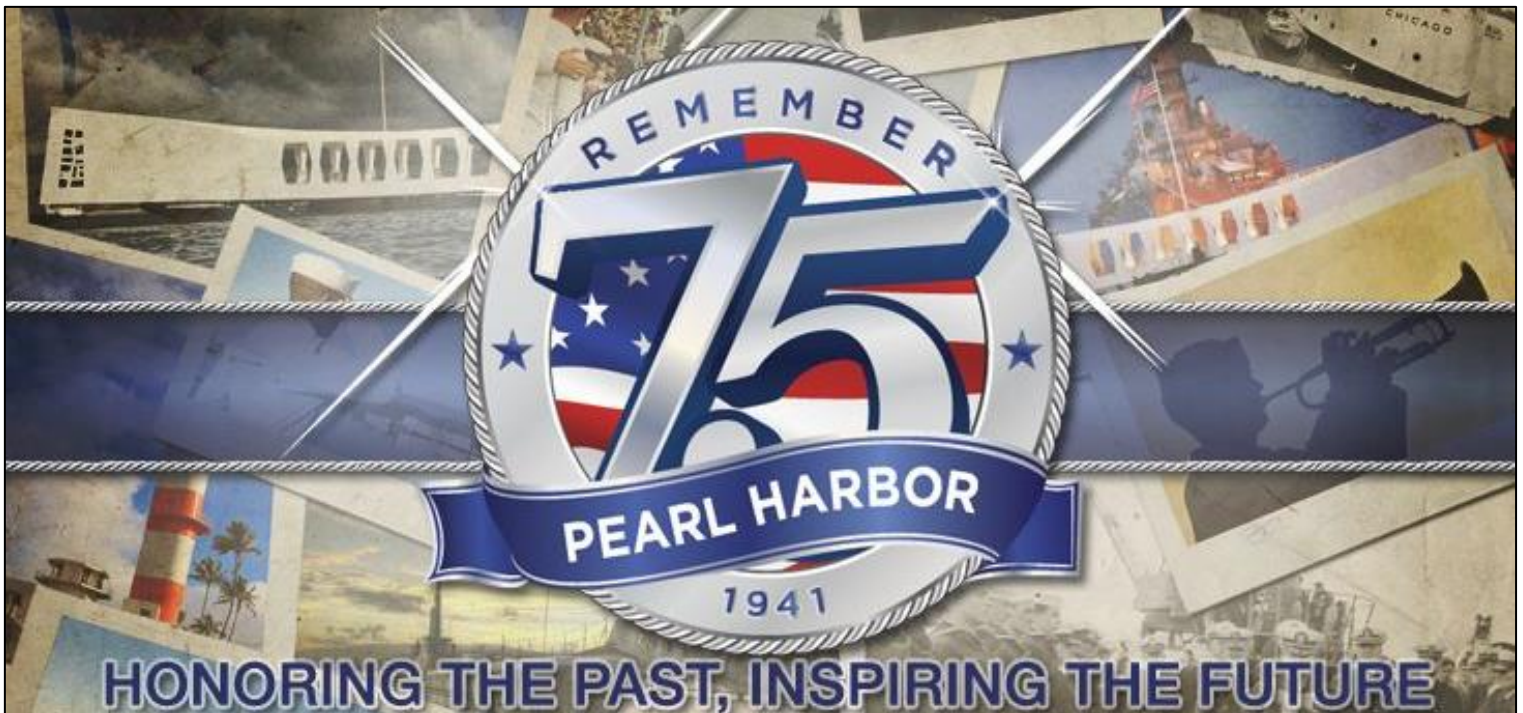


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Upcoming Events

Dec. 6 – Veterans Town Hall, Brainerd, MN
Dec. 12 – Veterans Town Hall, Chippewa Falls, WI
Dec. 13 – Veterans Town Hall, Waterloo, IA

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