



REFERRING FOR A COCHLEAR IMPLANT MADE EASY



Boots Hearingcare

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Barriers to cochlear implants

Cochlear implants (CIs) are a well-established treatment for severe to profound sensorineural hearing loss, offering significant improvements in hearing and quality of life. However, despite their proven efficacy, referral rates for CIs in the UK remain lower than expected given the estimated number of eligible candidates.

This suggests significant gaps in the referral process across all NHS and private hearing healthcare providers, with more support needed for Audiologists to talk about CI referral.

Over the past 12 months, Advanced Bionics (AB) has collaborated with Boots Hearingcare (BHC) to revise and streamline the CI referral process. It has been simplified by increasing AB's involvement, particularly in supporting clients through the steps toward CI referral. This collaborative approach aims to enhance guidance and improve the efficiency of the referral pathway.

KEY BARRIERS CONTRIBUTING TO LOW REFERRAL RATES

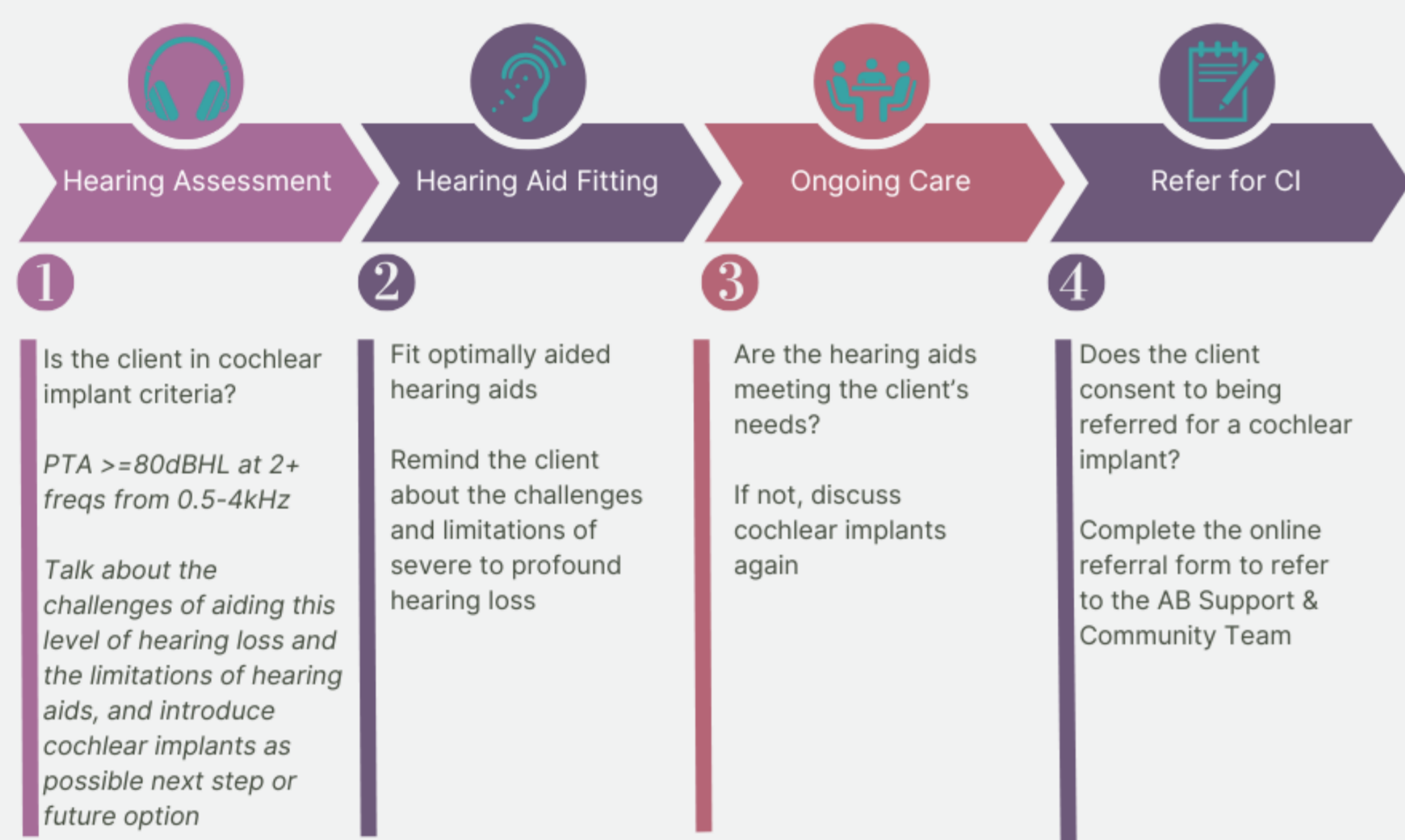
BARRIER	DESCRIPTION
Limited Awareness	A study by Raine et al. (2013) highlights that many healthcare professionals are not fully informed about cochlear implant candidacy criteria, leading to delays or missed opportunities for referral.
Geographical Disparities	Research shows variation in referral rates across different regions of the UK, with rural areas often having lower access to cochlear implant centers (Broomfield et al., 2013; Cullington et al., 2024)
Patient Awareness and Hesitancy	Many patients are either unaware of cochlear implants as an option or hesitant to proceed due to misconceptions about the surgery and rehabilitation process (Barnes et al., 2018).

Referring for a cochlear implant made easy

We have developed an online package of training modules, centred around CI awareness, criteria and referral that are accessible to all BHC Hearing Aid Audiologists (HAAs). We have also supported the preceptorship training for all new BHC graduates so we can equip them early on in their career with the right information and training.

But despite this, one of the main barriers to referral continues to be a lack of confidence in talking about CIs and answering questions confidently during those initial conversations. To address these potential barriers, we developed a new referral process (shown on the left). The client is referred to the AB Support & Community Team, who are professionals with experience of working in CI clinics, for initial discussion around CIs, prior to onward referral to a CI clinic.

The client's journey



Learnings

Feedback from the HAAs who have completed the training and used the referral process suggests our aim of increasing their awareness of CIs and confidence to refer has been effective.

“This course gave me greater confidence in talking to patients about CIs. It gave clear and easy to understand information about the required referral criteria and tips on how and when to talk to patients about CIs and how to advise them of next steps. I will definitely be more active and confident with talking about CIs with service users going forward”

From the clients, we learnt that peer support is one of the most valuable things we can offer. NHS England has highlighted that access to peer support enables people to take a “more active role in the ongoing management of their health and wellbeing”. This sentiment is shared by the CI International Community of Action (CIICA), who also highlight the value of “a fellow traveler on the way” in their Living Guidelines. Over 30% of the clients on our pathway chose to speak with an Advanced Bionics Mentor as part of their early explorations of CIs. These Mentors draw on their lived-experience of Cochlear Implants to support people on their own hearing journeys. Feedback from clients (shown on the right) speaks for itself.

My two mentors were both passionate about the benefits of Cochlear Implants. Both had different things to share, their perspectives, their life experiences, and how much their lives have changed. Without them I would not be now looking forward to my Cochlear Implant Assessment and associated surgery. **Mark**

I work with Deaf children professionally. Even with my knowledge of CIs I was still daunted by the prospect of being referred as a possible candidate for one. Being put in touch with a mentor by AB was fantastic. Speaking to someone who had been on this journey offered me reassurance, answered questions, and validated my feelings. **Lesley**

Next steps

The feedback we have received from both HAAs and clients going through this pathway has been overwhelmingly positive. The HAAs feel that they are more likely to introduce the topic of CIs earlier on with more confidence about the next steps in the pathway. The clients feel that the consultations with AB are an excellent introduction to the prospect of CI, addresses their concerns and answers their questions with ease of communication. Consequently, clients are more motivated to consent for onward referral for CI assessment and referral rates from BHC have increased. Going forward, we would like to expand this to other referrers and work with them to make sure everyone who could benefit from a CI are given the opportunity to do so.

References

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