



MEDIA RELEASE

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## Wellbeing Budget delivers only heartbreak for Cochlear Implant patients.

Despite surgery readily available to restore both their hearing and the life they once enjoyed, nearly 200 New Zealanders again had their hopes dashed today with no announcement of increased Cochlear Implants in the 2019 Budget.

Southern Cochlear Implant Programme (SCIP) General Manager Neil Heslop described the Government's decision as heart-breaking for both patients, their families and his dedicated team.

"As experienced health professionals we are acutely aware of the pressure on Vote Health but we really hoped that this would be the year we could tell those who've waited so long, often in despair and isolation, that we can now finally afford to restore their hearing," Neil Heslop said.

A cochlear implant is a surgically-implanted electronic device that restores hearing for those with profound hearing loss.

"Nothing encompasses "wellbeing" like giving back a New Zealander's hearing - to escape the silence, loneliness and the profound emotional and mental impact many of our patients know or will soon face.

"The much touted theme of this year's Budget looked as though further Cochlear Implants would be an obvious investment - it ticked several of the "wellness" boxes, including innovation, as we readily have the life-changing technology available, and have the data that underpins its personal and wider community benefits.

"We've spent months providing Ministers with briefings and asking for face-to-face meetings. We've even had patients who continue to wait share their stories which is a deeply personal thing to do. One of these people was Ricky McLeod, who has been on the waiting list for a cochlear implant for over four years.

Ricky lives by himself in the small North Island community of Raetihi. His profound hearing loss makes it extremely difficult for him to communicate with others, impacting on his ability to find employment. This has led to a lack of confidence, which means Ricky spends most of his days in the safety of a secluded warehouse stripping cars for scrap metal; a place where he knows he won't have to socialise.

He has limited contact with anyone, except one friend who helps him to communicate when needed. The resulting isolation has left Ricky feeling uncertain about what will happen to him in the future.

“As we reminded Ministers, 40 adults nationally are funded every year, but this base figure hasn’t changed for more than five years and is now inadequate.

“We have nearly 200 adults who currently meet Ministry of Health criteria for surgery that will restore their hearing and change their lives.

“Without an increase in Government support the majority have lost one of their five crucial senses forever and will never hear again – unless they have \$50,000 to fund the procedure privately.

“No further funding means, based on current referral rates there could be 500 adults waiting for a cochlear implant in as little as four years,” Neil Heslop said.

## THE FACTS ON COCHLEAR IMPLANTS

- Starting with this year’s Budget, SCIP requested Ministers increase the annual number of adult surgeries from 40 to 120 to address the most urgent cases. The previous government provided **only a one-off increase of \$6.5 million for an extra 60 adult cochlear implants in 2017/18**, after a 26,000 signature petition was presented to Parliament.
- There are nearly 200 adults nationally who meet the Ministry of Health’s own guidelines for a cochlear implant. **There is no prospect they will receive one without more, sustainable, funding.**
- SCIP receives five referrals for every funded adult cochlear implant. **Unlike other surgical procedures, cochlear implants are not covered by health insurance.** Only 20 percent of patients are in a position to self-fund.
- Hearing aids become ineffective when the hearing loss is more than severe. Communication through spoken language becomes impossible. **A cochlear implant is the last and only viable treatment that will restore hearing.**
- Behind the numbers there are real people. Parents who can no longer hear their children’s voices, talented professionals who are now unemployed, and people who are isolated because they can’t communicate. **Often they will present with clinical depression or anxiety, which leads to downstream social and economic effects** on them and their family.
- SCIP is one of two cochlear implant providers in New Zealand, caring for adult and paediatric patients south of Taupo. The Northern Cochlear Implant Programme (NCIP) cares for patients north of Taupo. NCIP’s Board and Chief Executive Lee Schoushokoff support the call for increased government funding.
- Government funding for children is currently meeting demand.

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***For further information, please contact:***

Katie Moore  
Convergence Communications  
[katie@conv.co.nz](mailto:katie@conv.co.nz)  
022 0922 573

**About the Southern Cochlear Implant Programme (SCIP)**

SCIP, a registered charity, is funded by the Ministry of Health to provide public cochlear implant services to children and adults. It also provides private procedures to those who do not meet the eligibility guidelines. Because demand often exceeds government funding, SCIP relies on public donations and bequests to fund cochlear implants for those in need.

Established in 2003, SCIP currently provides care to more than 950 adults and children throughout the South Island and as far north as Taupo. Its offices in Christchurch and Wellington are complimented by regular visiting clinics throughout the catchment area.

SCIP's team performs all cochlear implant assessments, arranges surgery, activates the cochlear implant, administers adjustments and provides post-implant rehabilitation services.