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Physician Bill Lippy passing on his knowledge via an online library

Posted by [Mary Vanac/Plain Dealer Reporter](#) November 17, 2008 12:10PM

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Marvin Fong/The Plain Dealer

Dr. Bill Lippy removes his surgical mask after restoring the hearing of a patient who has otosclerosis -- a genetic disease that slowly robs hearing through bone overgrowth in the middle ear.

Dr. Bill Lippy uses a surgical microscope to peer through a 3-millimeter opening into a patient's middle ear.

The doctor already has moved aside the eardrum to reveal the tiny bones -- the malleus, incus and stapes -- that relay sound waves to the brain to produce hearing.

This patient, however, can't hear in one ear. He has otosclerosis, a genetic disease that causes an overgrowth of

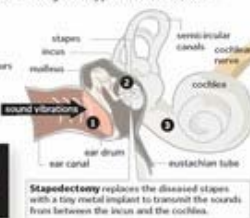
Surgery may restore lost hearing

Three tiny bones in the middle ear — the malleus (hammer), incus (anvil) and stapes (stirring) — vibrate to carry sound waves to the inner ear. Bone overgrowth, caused by a condition called otosclerosis, stops the stapes from vibrating and gradually causes hearing loss. A microsurgical procedure called a stapedectomy can restore hearing for many patients with otosclerosis.

How the ear works

- 1 Sound causes ear drum to vibrate.
- 2 Vibrations from the ear drums are transmitted by malleus, incus and stapes to the cochlea. Otosclerosis occurs when bone grows over the stapes and prevents it from vibrating.
- 3 Nerve endings in the cochlea pick up the vibrations and send them to the brain, which interprets the sound.

Bones of the middle ear



Stapedectomy replaces the diseased stapes with a tiny metal implant to transmit the sounds from between the incus and the cochlea.

SCIENCE: Loren Grigg; "The Harper Collins Illustrated Medical Dictionary" by Dan, Steffen and Ester (Illustrated); 1993; "The Surgery Book" by Robert Hoopes, M.D.; (IL) Martin, Griffin, 2002

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bone to keep the stapes -- sometimes called the stirrup -- from vibrating to pass along sound.

Lippy separates the stapes from the incus, cuts the tendon that connects the tiniest bone in the body, then removes the stapes.

He replaces it by placing a vein graft over the now open oval window. Then he places a Lippy Titanium Prosthesis -- a sliver of titanium with a tiny hook on one end -- between the incus bone and the vein graft.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Lippy asks.

Within minutes, Lippy tests the hearing of his patient who has been awake during surgery. "Good morning, sir," Lippy says. "When you hear the sounds, say 'yes.' "

"Yes . . . yes . . . yes," the patient responds to the sounds that get softer and softer.

Lippy, an ear doctor in Warren, has done more than 17,000 stapedectomies -- surgeries to replace the stapes -- over his 45-year career. But he grins behind his surgical mask when he realizes that he's given back the gift of hearing to another patient.

Now, he's sharing his lifetime of expertise with the world.

He, his partner Dr. Leonard Berenholz, and his son, David, have created a video library about stapedectomy and otosclerosis for doctors everywhere. The Lippy Library is available online at TheLippyLibrary.com.



Marvin Fong/The Plain Dealer

Dr. Bill Lippy performs a stapedectomy at Trumbull Memorial Hospital Center for Surgery in Cortland. Lippy replaces a diseased bone in his patient's middle ear with a titanium prosthesis and a vein graft.

Data and expertise

Lippy is an expert at revision stapedectomy -- repeat surgery to correct failed stapedectomies. Doctors from all over the world call, fax and e-mail Lippy with their questions, and they often send their patients to Warren for revision surgeries.

Over the years, Lippy has kept meticulous data on what works and what doesn't work, recording and analyzing thousands of coded cases in a computer database.

"The diagnosis of otosclerosis, that's 14a," Lippy says as he leafs through his code book, recording the numbers that describe the patient on whom he just operated. "We did a stapedectomy, that's 16a."

He's written more than 60 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters by analyzing the data. "There are so many things in [the data] that we can now make common knowledge," he said.

Berenholz, who learned how to perform stapedectomies as a fellow at Lippy's practice, said the data is unique because it stretches back to the 1960s.

"The idea is, we're up in morning, the same day the data retrieval is underway," Berenholz said. "Usually within a short period of time, we get the data [from a research associate]. That's why we've been able to be so productive."

Such data and research depth is unusual in small-town practices, Berenholz said.

And small-town life has agreed with Lippy, who launched four sons into adulthood with his wife Sandra. He walks through the woods to his office each morning.

"It's been a great life," Lippy said. "I've had none of the politics of medicine. I've had none of the travel."

Publishing the truth

Lippy even used his database to shatter a 60-year-old myth.

"We were all taught that if a woman with otosclerosis became pregnant, her hearing got worse," Lippy said. Until 1950, abortion was offered as an alternative to pregnant women with otosclerosis.

"So we all were advising our patients not to get pregnant," he said.

While teaching his techniques to doctors in Israel -- something he's done twice a year for 40 years -- he realized patients with many children had no worse hearing than patients with no children.

When he got home, Lippy searched his database.

"Lo and behold, there was no difference in their hearing" for women patients.



Marvin Fong/The Plain Dealer

Dr. Bill Lippy prepares a report of the results of a stapedectomy he performed at Trumbull Memorial Hospital Center for Surgery in Cortland. Lippy has kept detailed records of his highly specialized surgeries for most of his 45-year career.

Otosclerosis is a genetic disease that affects mainly Caucasians, which include people from Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. It affects twice as many women as men. All of the seminal research on otosclerosis assumed it worsened with pregnancy.

Lippy soon tracked down the original paper on this theory: A transcript of a 1939 meeting in Nazi Germany.

"There was a man there from the Nazi party supervising the meeting," Lippy said. The man decided that because otosclerosis was inherited, it could compromise the purity of the Aryan race.

"And from that horrible paper, the rest of us -- for 61 years -- advised our patients incorrectly not to have children," Lippy said.

His paper debunking the myth was published in 2005.

The hot dog business

Born in 1928, William H. Lippy grew up in Niles. He was student council and class president, and an athlete at Niles McKinley High School in the mid-1940s.

"The whole idea was I would go to work for the Stevens Brothers in the hot dog business," Lippy said.

Harry Mosley Stevens of Niles is credited with inventing the hot dog. While an English major at Oberlin College, Lippy worked two summers for the Stevens brothers at Yankee Stadium in New York.

"My senior year, I just couldn't hack it, and I decided that I really wanted to go into medicine," Lippy said.

He graduated from Ohio State Medical School, where he also did his residency in ear, nose and throat medicine. He then studied with Dr. John Shea, who performed the first stapedectomy in 1956.

After three months of study with Shea, Lippy returned home to set up his own medical practice. "I was very close to my folks, so I decided to practice close," he said.

Making his mark

Lippy said he was most influenced by his mother, who had a photographic memory and ran the records room at her son's practice. "We never lost a record in the 25 years she worked," Lippy said.

Both parents were behind-the-scenes leaders in their small Jewish community.

Lippy, too, seems to be a natural-born leader.

In Israel, Lippy has left his mark, promoting cooperation between Arab and Jewish children.

An avid exerciser, he noticed that Israeli youth played soccer and basketball, but not tennis. "So I got a bunch of people together, and we built a tennis center for kids," Lippy said.

Today, 15 Israel Tennis Centers have taught 400,000 youth tennis skills -- and helped them learn how to get along.

"We teach them how to shake hands, how to win and how to lose," Lippy said.

At home, an effort to get his employees to buy American-made cars mushroomed into a national campaign.

"In 1992, the American economy was in a funk," Lippy said. That included Mahoning Valley automakers.

Lippy offered \$600 to any employee who bought an American car. "I called a number of friends, and they agreed to do the same," he said.

Within a month, the Jumpstart America campaign went national with Lippy doing interviews for network television news.

"We ended up with over 80,000 employers involving some 15 million people that came into the program," Lippy said. "And the American car market -- the American share of the market -- increased for the first time in 30 years.

"It's probably the most significant thing I've ever done."

Familiar routine

At the Trumbull Memorial Hospital Center for Surgery in Cortland, Lippy talks and laughs easily with the surgical technicians after the procedure. He has worked with some of them more than 20 years.

"You can see, it's a fun surgery," he says, smiling.

He sheds his disposable surgical mask, cap and booties and walks to an old-fashioned button telephone on a desk. He punches in several numbers, then dictates successful results of the surgery on his 92-year-old patient.

It's something Lippy has done thousands of times.

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