

SOUND BARRIERS



The Dallas Morning News: Ronald Martinez

As she hears the word "eye" during her first session of speech therapy, Besa Shala points a marker to her eye. Working with her Thursday was Linda Daniel of Dallas Otolaryngology Associates.

Deaf girl from Kosovo gains hearing through Dallas surgery

By Leif B. Strickland

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

During the first two years of her life, Besa Shala never heard the sound of her mother's voice, of music or of the bombs exploding near her family's house in Kosovo. She was born deaf.

But last week, when a Dallas doctor activated a tiny device in the young girl's inner ear, the silence ended.

"I didn't believe Besa would ever be

■ Millosevic agrees to peace terms. 1A

able to hear," Hamez Shala, Besa's father, said Thursday as an audiologist worked with his daughter. "We didn't have the money for this, but people here have helped us. I am so happy."

In November, a British aid organization paid for the Shalas to come to Dallas on the promise that Besa would get a cochlear implant, which allows deaf people to perceive sound.

But the organization, Operation Angel, ran out of money a week after the family arrived, and the possibility of Besa getting the implant was uncertain. The total package, including the device, surgery and subsequent speech therapy, often costs more than \$80,000.

Mr. Shala pleaded with Bob Peters, the Dallas doctor whom Operation Angel had contacted about performing the surgery. On April 28, Dr. Peters obliged,

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Dallas surgery gives Kosovo girl hearing

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performing the operation pro bono, with an implant donated by the Colorado-based Cochlear Corp.

Some of the money for the operation and therapy was donated by the Dallas Hearing Foundation, a nonprofit organization that Dr. Peters founded two years ago to help children whose families don't have the means to pay for cochlear transplants. Part of the cost, Dr. Peters said, was paid out-of-pocket.

"We went ahead because Besa is such a good candidate," he said. "She's extremely intelligent."

On Thursday, during the first of many speech therapy sessions to come, audiologist Linda Daniel, along with Besa's parents, worked to teach Besa basic words and sounds. She has to go through the same verbal stages of learning that all babies goes through, Ms. Daniel said.

Although Ms. Daniel said some children who receive implants are frightened by sound during the first few weeks, Besa was calm. Several times during the fine-tuning of the implant's metallic, computerized sound Thursday morning, Besa touched her earpiece and smiled.

"I didn't believe Besa would ever be able to hear. We didn't have the money for this, but people here have helped us. I am so happy."

— Hamer Shala, Besa's father

Now that the surgery is over, the Shala family hopes to persuade the State Department to grant them political asylum. Besa has to stay in the United States, Dr. Peters said, to continue her therapy; otherwise, the implant may be useless.

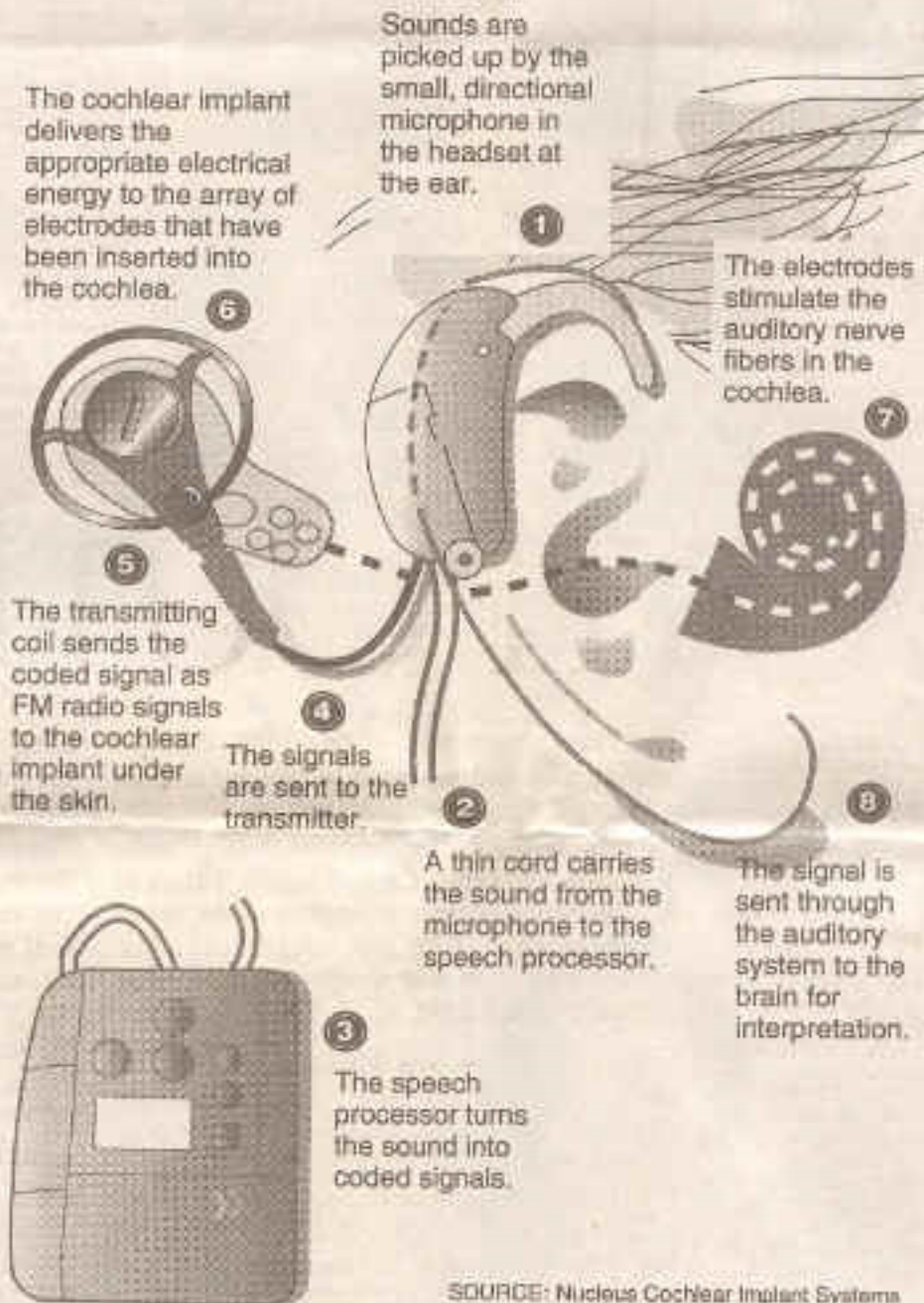
If Besa, her parents and her three siblings aren't granted asylum, Dr. Peters said, he will have to continue requesting six-month medical visas for them.

As they wait to hear whether they can stay, though, Mr. Shala said he would count the family's blessings.

"My daughter can hear, and we are safe," said Mr. Shala, who said he has displaced relatives in Albania, Germany, the United States and a couple other countries. "We are very thankful."

HOW IT WORKS

Cochlear implants such as the one used by Besa Shala compensate for damaged or absent hair cells by stimulating nerve fibers. They do not amplify sounds, like hearing aids. They allow profoundly deaf people to perceive sound.



SOURCE: Nucleus Cochlear Implant Systems