

Press Release

“I can talk just fine without a larynx”

Innovative voice prosthesis from the Freudenberg Group enables Thomas Müller to speak

Weinheim. October 20, 2017. Around 20,000 people in Germany live without a larynx. The most common cause is laryngeal cancer. After removal of the larynx, the breathing and feeding paths are completely separated from one another. The trachea is sewn into the throat skin and an opening or ‘stoma’ is created, which from then on is used exclusively for breathing. After this intervention, conventional speech is no longer possible. Thomas Müller is just one of the people to have experienced this. Following his second cancer, his larynx was removed in 2006. The fact that the 59-year-old from Waldfishbach in southern Germany can now speak again is down to a one-way valve between the trachea and esophagus. This is known as a voice prosthesis or voice valve. “After my diagnosis, I was angry at the whole world. Today I can communicate without a larynx”, Müller explained. “I get along fine with the prosthesis; it’s part of me now. Cleaning and changing it have become as natural to me as brushing my teeth.” This has all been made possible by the Freudenberg Group’s modern and innovative medical technology. Freudenberg Medical develops and manufactures voice prostheses under the InHealth brand.

“Of course, the disease has changed my life. I live in the here and now and am grateful for every day. Material things are no longer so important”, said Müller. On his upper arm, he has three dates tattooed: his year of birth in 1957 and the years 1981 and

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2006, in which he survived his cancers. “Surviving two cancers is a miracle.” Müller’s voice sounds husky, but it is easy to understand. “The frequency of the voice is lower, which is a problem for women in particular. It was a new experience for me, having people turn around when they heard my voice for the first time”, he explained. An alternative to the vocal prosthesis is learning how to use the compensatory voice. This involves the swallowing and controlled dispensing of air. It is difficult to learn and allows only short sentences. An electrically operated sound generator, another possibility, is easy to use but sounds tinny and unnatural.

When Thomas speaks, he puts a finger on the filter in front of the stoma, thus closing the trachea. The one-way valve then directs the air from exhalation via the trachea and into the esophagus, using the vibration of the muscles as a substitute for vocal chords. “There are also hands-free models. Personally, I prefer my version because a hands-free valve generates breathing noises. It also requires a response pressure that produces a sound. Still, there is one big advantage: I can speak and use both hands at the same time”, Müller observed. The valve needs to be cleaned daily and is regularly replaced. This is done in the ENT doctor’s office and only takes a few minutes.

Because his larynx has been removed, Müller breathes exclusively through the stoma. As a result, he has lost the functions of nose and mouth breathing, such as cleaning, humidification and heating of the air. These tasks are taken on by a filter. He has also lost the ability to smell but there is a trick for this, whereby the affected person creates a vacuum in the mouth and throat space. Known as polite yawning, this action sucks air into the nose and stimulates the scent tissues.

He shares his experiences with other affected people. In Kaiserslautern, he founded a self-help group called ‘Palatina’ for

people who have had head and neck operations. He is the group's spokesman. Their meetings are regularly attended by around 20 people between the ages of 45 and 80. "We advise people before and after their operations and help with their applications for disability certificates and pensions. Even if someone initially takes his anger out on me, I will still leave my contact details there and come back again. Everyone needs time to deal with their own situation", said Müller. In the long term, he would like to get involved in the state and federal governing councils, with the aim of creating better structures for patients.

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