



**BC NURSES'  
UNION**

*Standing up for health care*

## Cochlear Implant Leads to New Nursing Career



**TEAM EFFORT** Kelowna General Hospital's Jordona Hubber is grateful for the support she received through the Enhanced Disability Management Program that got her back to work after she experienced debilitating hearing loss. From left: Hubber, Human Resource Business Partner Cory Burnett, Disability Management Program Leader Brendan Hamilton and Ambulatory Care Manager Denise Dunton.

### Enhanced Disability Management Program a model of collaboration and creativity

**T**he mysterious noise in Jordona Hubber's right ear started as a quiet buzz. It began in 2009 and became progressively louder as it also moved into her other ear. After five years of buzzing sounds the noise grew into a constant high-pitched scream until she completely lost the ability to recognize normal sounds and suffered hearing loss in both ears.

"It's hard to explain the false sounds that my ears produce," says Hubber. "It's like a high-pitched human scream combined with the sound of data going over a dial-up line. That's the signal my ears send to my brain all day long."

Hubber was working on a medical/surgical unit at Kelowna General Hospital (KGH) when her hearing started to falter. And as her condition worsened she couldn't perform the safety-sensitive parts of nursing work.

"The biggest challenge I had was hearing clearly over the phone," says Hubber. "I was pretty good at lip reading, but when I couldn't physically see other clinicians talking to me it was hard to understand them and practice safely."

In 2016 Hubber withdrew from nursing practice because her hearing aids were no longer effective. And without surgery nothing could be done to improve her hearing. Doctors said she would need a cochlear implant if she were to have any hope of returning to work.

Cochlear implants are surgically implanted devices that bypass the normal hearing process. They create electric signals that directly stimulate the auditory nerve. With training, the brain interprets those signals as sound and speech.

Hubber was grateful for the medical solution that promised to allow her to practise again, but confesses that she was skeptical about the chances for success.

"Leaving nursing was one of the hardest things I ever did," she says. "I love my career and was worried that I wouldn't be able to continue nursing after my cochlear surgery."

But Hubber would soon learn that an even bigger hurdle she would have to overcome was the wait-time for the procedure.

"My medical team told me there would be a two-year wait for surgery," she says. "But our long-term disability program would run out before my post-operative rehabilitation was finished."

Hubber was determined to do something about the lengthy delay. After discussions with her care team she contacted the media and in 2016 The Vancouver Sun and CTV News published stories about her experience, the systemic challenges she faced and the impact waiting for surgery would have on her family.

Fortunately, the province increased funding for cochlear implants shortly after those stories appeared, and Hubber underwent surgery 10 months later.

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*- Jordona Hubber*

Her surgery went well and Hubber's team at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver taught her how to use the cochlear implant to hear again. After six months of rehabilitation Hubber felt ready to return to nursing - and the Enhanced Disability Management Program (EDMP) was there to help.

First negotiated by the Nurses' Bargaining Association and provincial health employers in 2010, today EDMP is a widely available customized disability management program that any union member with an occupational or non-occupational illness or injury can access.

Based on best practices, EDMP enhances the support provided to nurses struggling with illness or injury by addressing barriers to resuming work. It sets out regular reviews and monitoring of individuals and is intended to provide a more seamless process for returning to work.

BCNU EDMP representatives help program participants access rehabilitation services and work with disability managers through the Duty to Accommodate (DTA) process to facilitate their return to work.

Hubber's biggest concern was the fact that she still couldn't hear as well over the phone as she could in person, and she worried this would be a barrier to nursing. That's when her former colleague Melanie McMahon started advocating for her. McMahon was following Hubber's health journey on Facebook, and when she read that Hubber wanted to return to work she moved into action right away.

"I worked with Jordona at KGH and I know she's a fantastic nurse," says McMahon. "Several years ago I moved to the colon screening program and I thought this would be a good unit for Jordona with her corrected hearing. So I asked my manager to keep her in mind when we had our next vacancy."

Interior Health manager Denise Dunton manages five units at KGH and tries to accommodate nurses with disabilities whenever she can.

"I like to be proactive and help nurses return to work," she says. "That means letting disability management know in advance when I'm expecting a vacancy. Senior nurses have lots of training, experience and knowledge and I want them working in my units whenever it's possible."

Dunton knew there would be challenges to work through. But she also knew that hearing technologies were advancing quickly and she was determined to try and make Hubber's placement work.

So Dunton, EDMP representative Janet Barrett and IH's disability management office quickly engaged audiology specialists at St Paul's Hospital. They recommended a new Bluetooth technology that pipes sound directly from the phone into Hubber's cochlear implants. It worked perfectly.

Hubber now clearly understands phone conversations and says she only has challenges with clients who have strong accents. Dunton has accommodated this issue by ensuring that clerical staff screened clients and assign those with strong accents to other nurses.

Hubber has used the Bluetooth technology for over a year and it has corrected her hearing to the point that she can hear as well as someone who's not disabled. And the more she works with it the better it gets.

"I feel so grateful that I can support my family and I'm back at work doing what I love," says Hubber. "It took a great manager, supportive colleagues and a creative disability team to make this work."

"Jordona's accommodation shows us how the Enhanced Disability Management Program is successful when everyone pulls together," says IH Workplace Health and Safety Corporate Director John Bevanda. "Our disability management team helps ill and injured employees stabilize their health and return to work."

Jordona's story is a testament to how creative thinking can rebuild careers and improve employees' quality of life."

BCNU executive councillor for health and safety Rhonda Croft says Hubber's success story is exactly the kind of news that nurses like to hear. "Helping ill or injured nurses return to work can sometimes be a challenge and the creative teamwork with Jordona's accommodation is a model for others to follow across the province." •

For more information and to find the name of your EDMP representative please visit the BCNU website.

**UPDATE** (*October 2018*)

**NEXT STORY**

[HOME](#) [NEWS AND EVENTS](#) [UPDATE MAGAZINE](#)

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