

Richard Rundle

My Meniere's Journey

It is 2021 and I am 67 years old and living in Ballarat Victoria. I was born in country SA. I had a career as an accountant, auditor, and financial management advisor.

In 1989 I was living in WA working for a mining company and in my mid 30s. My partner commented that I seemed to be missing parts of our conversations. I went to an ENT who checked both ears and confirmed I was starting to lose my hearing. He also said the hearing loss was sensorineural and mentioned the possibility of Meniere's Disease. None of his meant anything to me. This was very early days of the internet, and it was not generally available.

About the same time, I was playing tennis on the wonderful grass courts at Cottesloe and had gone from being a competent player to one was falling over at net and generally becoming clumsy and doing things like falling on my racket and breaking ribs, and another time my wrist. (Now just in case you are thinking of a tall lanky player of 193 cms then think again of a bloke who at full stretch nearly reaches 167cm and carried more weight than he should). I am sure this was the start of my balance problems.

I got the first of my many hearing aids – an in the ear Starkey. The start of my love and hate relationship with hearing aids.

Somehow, I found out some more about MD and was able to get an appointment with a Professor at Melbourne Uni when I was over for the Australian Open tennis in 1990. I had a great boss who used to schedule meetings so interstate visitors could go to the tennis! The Prof had a clinic on Moreland Rd in Coburg but I do not remember his name. He confirmed I had MD even though I had only one vertigo attack in 2 years and I was put onto Moduretic. It was savage and you needed to plan your morning so as to be sure you were not in a car or a plane with the seat belts signs illuminated when you needed a loo very quickly.

The hearing deteriorated over the next 4 years and by then I had experienced my first severe tinnitus and chronic vertigo. Somehow, I managed this while being a regular traveller to South East Asia and enjoying the delights of fizzing hearing aid batteries due to heat and humidity. I was also starting to see some patterns emerging. I would have my tinnitus get worse then I lost some clarity in hearing and then the balance would go. That pattern has stayed with me to the current time even though I don't get vertigo anymore.

In 1994 I ended up in Ballarat working on the Jeff Kennett council amalgamations and consulted Richard Roper an audiologist who wore 2 hearing aids himself. He updated my hearing aid and prescribed a second aid and now I was bilateral for the first time, and it made a big difference. I also started having a relationship with broken battery case doors!

Over the next 6 years I went through several more sets of hearing aids and replacement doors!

In 2000 I moved to Canberra, and I finally found out about dietary issues with sodium and caffeine etc. We started low sodium diet and I had fewer vertigo events, but I am really not sure if the change made the difference or not. I had been on Serc for 10 years and I really don't think it did anything for me. I was taken off the diuretics due to concern over kidney health. I was fortunate that I was working at a senior level so if I had a bad day then things got rearranged or someone went to a meeting for me.

In 2006 I accepted a role on a World Bank project in Afghanistan as advisor to the Auditor General. It was a very stressful work environment, and I had some shocking vertigo episodes. I have no doubt that stress and my inability to control sodium intake had a role to play. I remember the time I had to fly to Dubai as I had run out of battery covers. \$800 in airfares and accommodation and \$8 for the repair! I also bought a spare hearing aid as insurance. It cost a third of what they cost in Australia

In 2009 I transferred to a project based in Kazakhstan and while the stress continued as I was working in a country that used Russian and Kazakh and I spoke neither. Whilst I tried to learn some Russian, I found my worsening deafness made it very hard. I did learn some written Russian so I could survive in the supermarket. My vertigo was much better there and the fact that I mostly prepared my own meals and avoided processed foods made my sodium intake more manageable. My hearing was getting worse, and it made my work and limited social life much harder.

In 2012 I was back home and ready for some help with my hearing. I was too deaf to work. In 2013 I was finally deaf enough for a Cochlear implant. I think I needed one at least 4 years earlier but the criteria were tougher back then. I can remember one time saying to my ENT that well how deaf do I have to be to be accepted as I cannot understand much at all.

I had a good switch on after an uneventful implant operation. I could understand some words even though it sounded like the chipmunks. I did hearing rehab for 6 months and had a good result.

I started as coordinator for the Ballarat Support Group which I continue to do. The tinnitus was still with me, but I have got used to that in my life. I started VRT and had some benefits, but it does not help much anymore as my imbalance has slowly worsened. I now have a wheeled walking device called a rollator. Thank you NDIS. It has made a huge difference for me, and I have even been able to travel interstate.

My end stage Meniere's Disease sees me with the prospect of no improvement in my balance. I am able to do the house keeping while my partner runs a retail business. I cannot work safely in the garden. I still get severe tinnitus, but I am used to it. I still get some distortion in my hearing even though I am wearing two Cochlear Implants. I think the distortion is in my sound processing centre in the head. It may last a day and then my balance will be quite poor, and I go to bed and try not to watch too much movement on TV. The Cochlear Implants have been one of the most life changing experiences for me and I am forever grateful for them.

The journey continues....