

# A prototype became commercially possible: the tiger team

‘Watch this, Lois,’ instructed Peter Seligman as he waved a coil of wire above another coil to demonstrate to the audiologist a much simplified method of getting power and data across the skin in a secure and efficient way. Two circuit boards the size of paperback books lay on the bench in front of them. A light came on in one of them. ‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘A cochlear implant,’ Seligman announced. ‘See when I bring this coil close to that one, the light comes on. That light represents an electrode. If I change this switch on the other board, a different light comes on.’ ‘And’, he proudly went on, ‘all the power comes from this board, the one that’s outside the body.’ ‘That is a cochlear implant?’ the audiologist asked sceptically. ‘Well, it’s a beginning,’ Seligman replied.

It was 1980 and patents for a commercial cochlear implant device had been registered, a costing plan had been developed and a market study identifying a substantial market for the Melbourne device had been completed. Teletronics really needed to make a decision whether to tender for the project or walk away from it. Paul Trainor, CEO of the Nucleus Group, was very keen and David Money had also become convinced that it was a challenge worth pursuing. Jim Loughman, then CEO of Teletronics, was doubtful about the long term, realising that it would turn Teletronics in a very different direction. The French company Synthelab, a major shareholder of Teletronics, made it clear that the cochlear implant did not have enough in common with the cardiac treatment in which it was interested, so that meant that Teletronics would not be able to tender for the government grant to commercialise the cochlear device. Nucleus was not appropriate because it wasn’t an