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The Sound of Misinformation

By Lise Hamlin

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences brings on their Oscar Awards April 25, 2021. "Sound Of Metal," has been nominated for six awards: Best Picture, Best Actor (Riz Ahmed), Best Supporting Actor (Paul Raci), Best Original Screenplay, Best Film Editing and Best Sound at the Academy Awards.

"Sound Of Metal," is a story about a heavy metal drummer who is suddenly deafened. The actors Ahmed and Raci are receiving the most attention and driving people to see the film. Just what the Oscars buzz is supposed to do.

For sure, Ahmed delivers a fine performance portraying the drummer, Ruben. In every way Ruben's life is upended when he loses his hearing: his livelihood, his music, and his girlfriend all ripped from him in one fell swoop. Ahmed conveys the trauma of losing not just your hearing, your ability to communicate with the world, but finding the world you knew suddenly gone.

While I can applaud the acting, the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) takes issue with a screenplay full of misinformation. This movie that took years to research and, yet, still got totally wrong, basic information about cochlear implants and implantation itself. The film that started on good footing, delving into the emotional upheaval of one man dealing with his devils, turned into a disability message movie. The message is both facile and retro: cochlear implants equals bad; deafness equals good.

It's been a long time since cochlear implants (CIs) have received such bad press. Cochlear implants have been around a long time. We know their possibilities and limitations. We know they are not a miracle cure; they are simply another tool in our communication toolbox. But it is a powerful tool that allows many to work, to stay with the people in their lives who don't know sign language and to enjoy a life that includes the sounds of bird calls and music, alarm clocks and emergency alerts. It's a choice that works well for many, just as sign language is an option that works for others. We have

long said that no one size fits all people with hearing loss. Each of us needs to evaluate the options and chose what works best for him or her. No choice is perfect. After all, life itself isn't perfect, is it?

What is distressing about this film is that the choice the character makes is based largely on misinformation about cochlear implantation. The movie would have benefited from a fact checker or even better, consulted with someone who actually has been implanted to eliminate the obvious errors. Some of the obvious errors are:

- A doctor who tells Ruben the cost of cochlear implants without informing him that most insurance covers implantation.
- Putting Ruben in the position of being implanted bilaterally, all at once, without any time spent on preparing him for the procedure or aftermath.
- Subjecting Ruben to an audiologist who provides no guidance or empathy about expectations or help when he finds the quality of sound on activation is not like the sound he is used. to. (Didn't anyone warn him it takes a while? Apparently not.)

Around the world there is a massive gap between those who could potentially benefit from CIs and those who have them: only 5-10% of those in high income countries with severe-to-profound hearing loss have a CI, in spite of the benefits to individual and society being well proven. In low-income countries access is even lower. With movies like the "Sound of Metal" receiving so much applause, it's a wonder anyone gets a CI.

HLAA has recently joined the newly-formed [Cochlear Implant International Community of Action](#). We hope to learn from others who are advocating worldwide for greater acceptance of cochlear implants. Together we can see to it that more people find the truth of the matter even in an Oscar-nominated movie.

We hope to stamp out misinformation. That's the last thing people with hearing loss need.

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