



80-year-old spreads word on loss of voice box

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Like many of the 20 West Australians who have their voice box removed each year, Keith Johnson's lifeline to air and speech hinges on a small hole in his neck fitted with a plastic valve.

The 80-year-old uses a prosthetic voice box since the removal of his larynx 17 years ago after doctors discovered a tumour in his throat. Because he can no longer breathe through his nose or mouth, surgeons created an opening in his neck known as a stoma and fitted it with a one-way silicon rubber valve to help him talk.

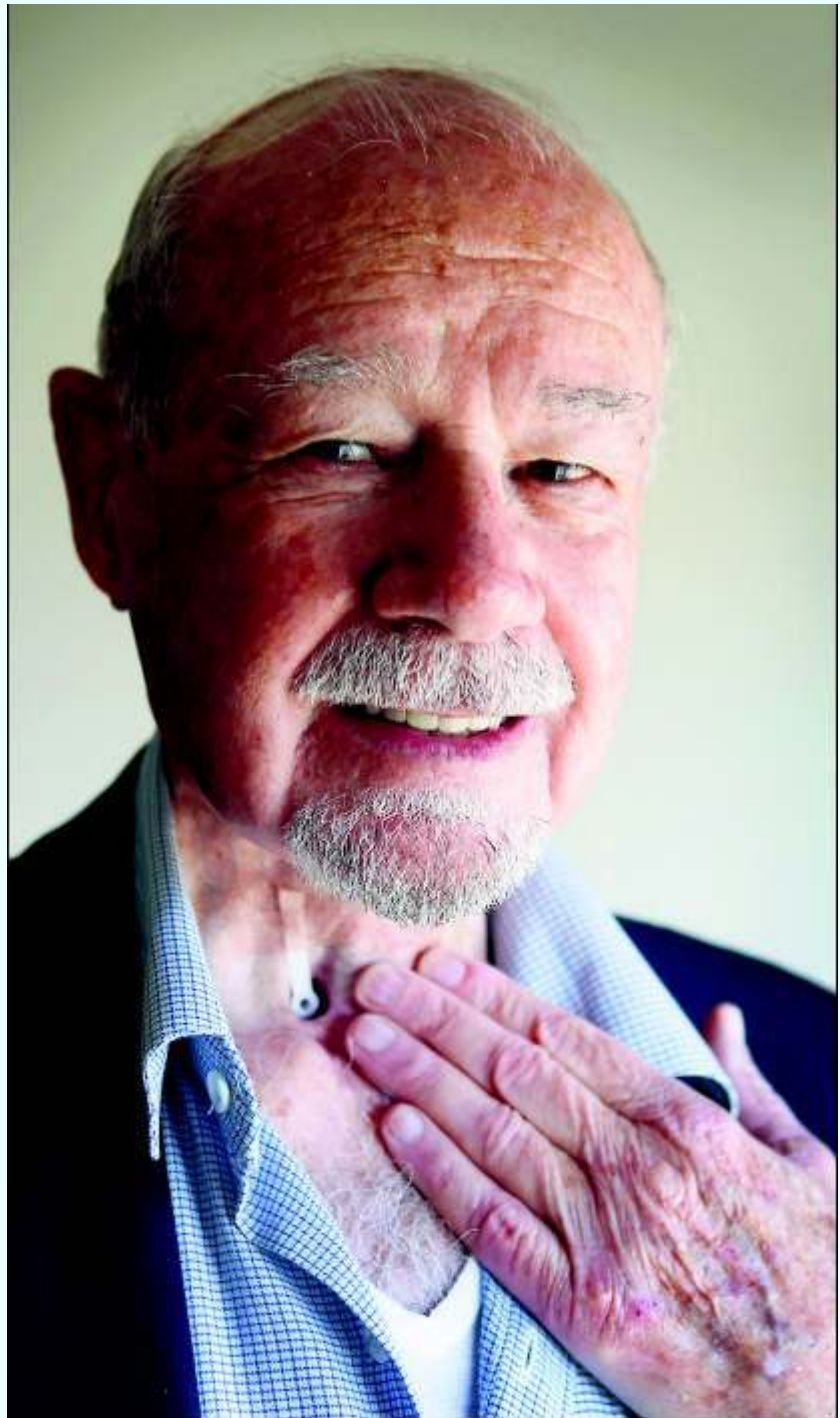
Covering the stoma with his finger allows him to temporarily redirect air into his nose and mouth to create speech.

But the former marine surveyor needs to take precautions to prevent food or liquid from entering his lungs and to stop the valve from accidentally becoming dislodged, which could leave him prone to respiratory problems or allow the hole to close over.

Mr Johnson, one of 60 West Australians diagnosed with cancer of the larynx each year, features in an Australian-first DVD which outlines how to help someone whose voice valve has become dislodged.

Produced by the Cancer Council of WA and Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital speech pathologists with Lotterywest funding, the DVD shows how to place a catheter into the stoma to keep it open.

Speech pathologists Melanie Sonsee and Geraldine Harris said that although there were only a small number of patients who had their larynx removed it was important to know how to help them if their valve



Digital first: Keith Johnson features in an Australian-first DVD which outlines how to help someone whose voice valve has become dislodged. Picture: Bill Hatto

became dislodged because there was the risk of potentially life-threatening consequences.

Mr Johnson said he originally found it difficult to communicate with people, particularly those who were wary

when they saw the hole in his neck. He could not swim any more and his sense of smell and taste had been affected.

"I can't sing but otherwise I've just decided to get on with it and it hasn't stopped me from talking," he said.