

touchpoints

Connecting you to Heritage Provider Network

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One breakthrough.
A million lives
changed.

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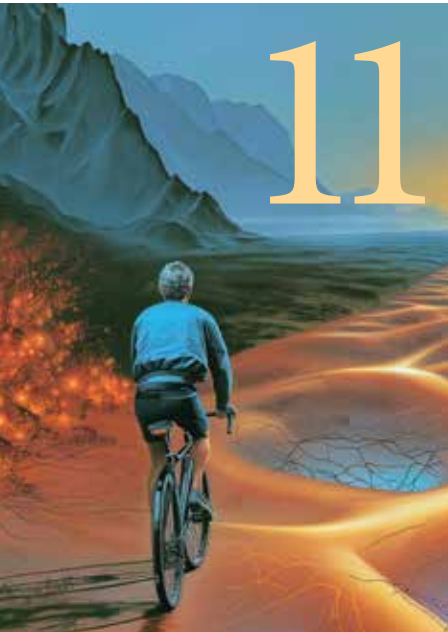
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■ **FEATURE STORY**

HEARING THE FUTURE

Five scientists receive the 2026 Merkin Prize for a cochlear implant breakthrough that changed millions of lives



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Crossroads

With Dr. Richard Merkin

Crossroads is the unique perspective of Richard Merkin, M.D., as innovation, technology, legislation and care delivery come together to impact the future of population health.



What happens when we refuse to give up?

Some of the most remarkable advances in medicine don't begin in a lab or boardroom. They begin with someone who refuses to give up, either on a patient or a problem that demands solving. That type of resolve doesn't just change what's possible. It changes what comes next.



That's what you'll find in this issue of *Touchpoints*.

We're celebrating five brilliant scientists who, working separately over decades, figured out how to help profoundly deaf people hear again. They didn't set out to change the world together, but their discoveries and determination fit together like puzzle pieces. Today, more than a million people are living with the sound of that collaboration.

This drive to keep pushing forward is especially true for Gregory Maassen, a man with a rare nerve condition that nearly left him bedridden. His doctor told him to exercise. He thought that was crazy. But he tried it anyway, eventually trading his bed for an e-bike and traveling 7,460 miles across the country. Along the way, his refusal to accept defeat raised money for the very research that would help give him his life back.

Accepting the status quo has never been an option at Desert Oasis Healthcare. Their provider teams have joined forces with technology to catch dangerous heart rhythm problems before patients even know anything is wrong. No emergency room. No crisis. Just smart, proactive care delivered at exactly the right time.

And when the mayor of Lancaster placed a key to the city in my hands, it felt like the kind of recognition that can only be earned. Over 45 years in the community, High Desert Medical Group (HDMG) has built something far greater than a medical practice. They became a legacy rooted in community, collaboration and a belief that exceptional healthcare belongs to everyone. The key to the city was symbolic, but HDMG's impact on the lives of those they serve is anything but.

Each of these stories is different, but they all come back to the same idea. The best medicine doesn't just react to illness. It gets ahead of it and never stops.

Richard Merkin, M.D.

President and CEO

Heritage Provider Network

Richard Merkin, M.D.

Healthcare visionary Richard Merkin, M.D., has spent more than 40 years implementing a successful, workable business model to address the needs and challenges of affordable managed healthcare.

Hearing the future

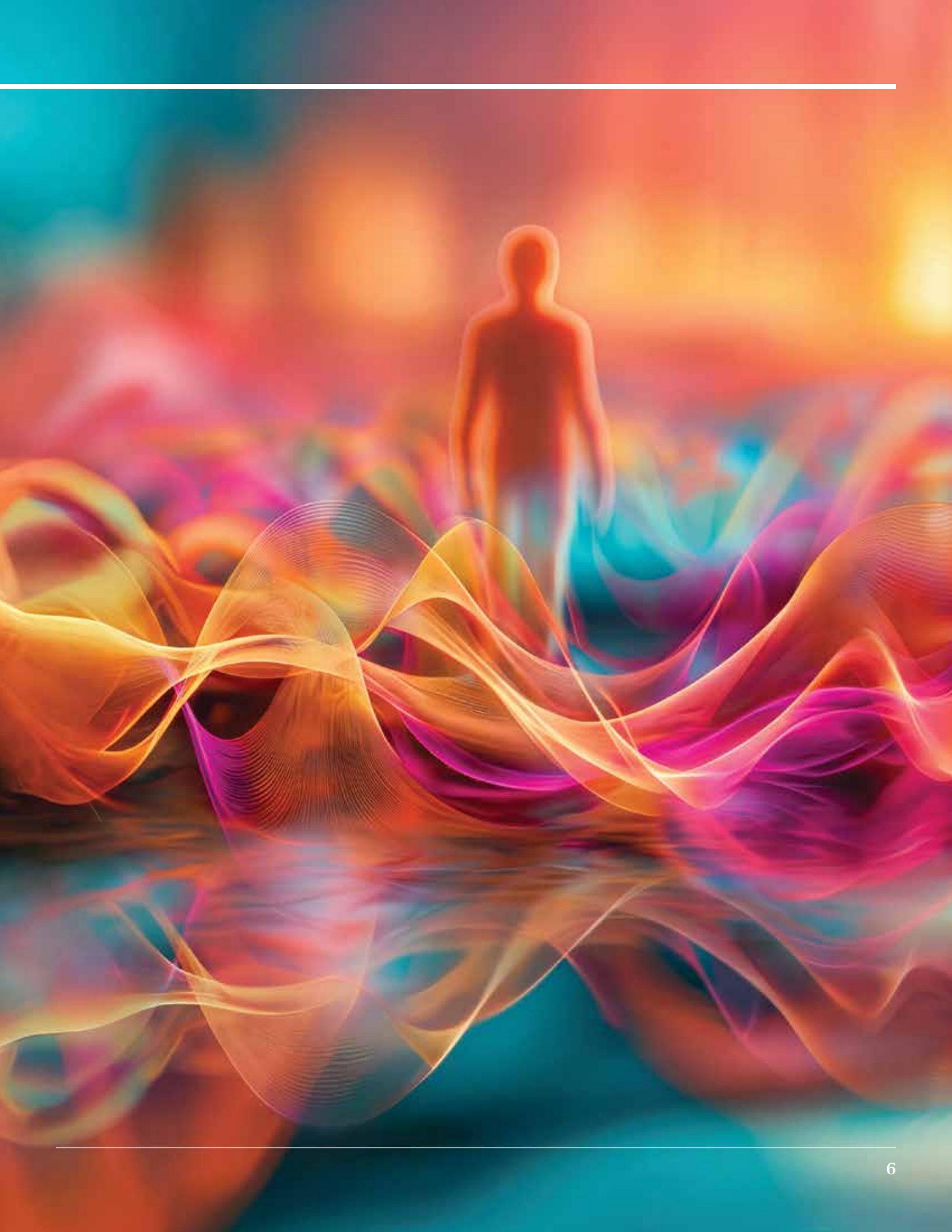
Five scientists. One breakthrough.
A million lives changed.

Five scientists receive the 2026 Merkin Prize for a cochlear implant breakthrough that changed millions of lives.

For most of history, profound deafness meant permanent silence. Today, more than a million people worldwide hear because five scientists refused to accept that belief.

Graeme Clark, Ph.D., M.S.; Erwin Hochmair, Dipl.Ing., Dr.techn.; Ingeborg Hochmair, Ph.D.; Michael Merzenich, Ph.D.; and Blake Wilson, D.Sci., D.Eng., Ph.D., have been jointly awarded the 2026 Richard N. Merkin Prize in Biomedical Technology for their complementary roles in developing the modern cochlear implant. It's the first medical device to interface with the human nervous system to restore a lost sense.

"Their achievement is stunning and represents the best of my intentions for the Merkin Prize," said Richard Merkin, M.D., founder and CEO of Heritage Provider Network. "Their work transformed sound and hearing awareness for millions of people across the globe."





Late 1960s **Dr. Graeme Clark**

Pioneered early multi-electrode designs in Australia.



1970s **Drs. Erwin and Ingeborg Hochmair**

Developed the first multi-channel implant in Vienna.



1985 **Dr. Michael Merzenich**

Advanced our understanding of neuroplasticity and auditory processing.

A problem no hearing aid could solve

Normal hearing depends on thousands of delicate hair cells in the cochlea that convert sound waves into nerve signals bound for the brain. When those cells are damaged or absent (the most common cause of severe hearing loss), no amount of amplification can compensate. They simply don't regenerate.

The five laureates shared a bold vision. They wanted to bypass the hair cells and deliver electrical signals directly to the auditory nerve. Working independently in separate fields and continents, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, each made essential contributions that the others could not have achieved alone.

"What makes this work especially remarkable is that it required not one breakthrough but several, achieved by different people working across different disciplines and different countries over many decades," said Harold Varmus, Nobel laureate and chair of the Merkin Prize selection committee.

Building the device, continent by continent

In Vienna, the Hochmairs developed the first microelectronics multi-channel cochlear implant at Vienna Technical University. The married couple's design featured a miniature receiver implanted beneath the skin and a flexible electrode array threaded into the cochlea to stimulate the auditory nerve at multiple points. On December 16, 1977, it was implanted in a deaf patient for the first time, making it a historic milestone. The

Hochmairs went on to found MED-EL, now one of the world's largest hearing implant manufacturers.

In Australia, ENT surgeon Dr. Graeme Clark, whose own father was deaf, led parallel research at the University of Melbourne, developing a subcutaneous receiver-stimulator and discovering a speech code that allowed his first implant patient to understand spoken communication without lipreading. That, in turn, produced the first FDA-approved multi-channel cochlear implant in 1985 and gave rise to the company Cochlear.

Meanwhile, Dr. Merzenich and his interdisciplinary team at University of California, San Francisco were establishing the neurophysiological foundation for the technology,



1989
Dr. Blake Wilson

Improved signal processing technology currently used in cochlear implants.



Today
A million+ lives

Modern cochlear implants help people of all ages hear and learn.



September 2026
Merkin Prize

Five pioneers jointly honored for transforming cochlear implant technology and restoring hearing for millions.

determining how implants could most effectively connect to the brain. As early as 1974, he convened leading U.S. speech and hearing experts and government officials to accelerate multi-channel implant development. This led to one of the first clinical trials, helping commercialize the devices through the company Advanced Bionics.

Cracking the code of sound

By the mid-1980s, multi-electrode implants were in clinical use, but the results were inconsistent. Many users still couldn't understand speech. The bottleneck wasn't hardware; it was software.

Blake Wilson solved it. In 1989, working at Duke University Medical Center and RTI International, Wilson

developed a signal-processing strategy called continuous interleaved sampling (CIS) that enabled intelligible speech understanding in more than 80 percent of cochlear implant users. This transformed the technology from an experimental treatment into a mainstream clinical option.

A legacy that extends far beyond the ear

The cochlear implant's impact has reverberated well beyond audiology. Studies of the device have deepened scientific understanding of neuroplasticity and how the brain adapts to sensory input. Perhaps more significantly, it showed that stimulating just a few dozen electrode sites could restore a lost sense, opening the door to emerging neural prostheses for vision and motor function.

“Their work transformed sound and hearing awareness for millions of people across the globe.”

~ Dr. Richard Merkin



“The whole story is a beautiful convergence of fields,” said Emery Brown of MIT, and Merkin Prize selection committee member. “You had neurophysiology, engineering

and behavioral science all working together. It’s a true example of how fundamental science can act as the backbone for life-changing technologies.”

The Merkin Prize in Biomedical Technology, administered by the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, awards groundbreaking technologies that make a measurable difference in human health. This year’s recipients were selected by a nine-member international committee of scientific leaders.

The five laureates were formally honored at the 2026 Richard N. Merkin Prize in Biomedical Technology ceremony in September. Visit <https://bit.ly/MerkinPrize> for the video.

Photo credit: ©Erik Jacobs, Anthem Multimedia

ABOUT THE HONOREES



Dr. Graeme Clark

Led the research that produced the first FDA-approved multiple-channel cochlear implant, marking the first time electronic technology was brought into a functional relationship with the central nervous system.



Dr. Erwin Hochmair

Is the co-founder of MED-EL, a company he co-founded with his wife, Ingeborg. With her help, they developed the world's first microelectronic multi-channel cochlear implant. He holds a doctorate in electrical engineering from the Technical University of Vienna.



Dr. Ingeborg Hochmair

Is the CEO and CTO of MED-EL, which she co-founded with her husband, Erwin. Together, they developed the world's first microelectronic multi-channel cochlear implant. She holds a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from the Technical University of Vienna.



Dr. Michael Merzenich

Is the Francis Sooy Professor Emeritus at the University of California, San Francisco. His research was instrumental in the development of multiple-channel cochlear implants and has pioneered our understanding of brain plasticity.



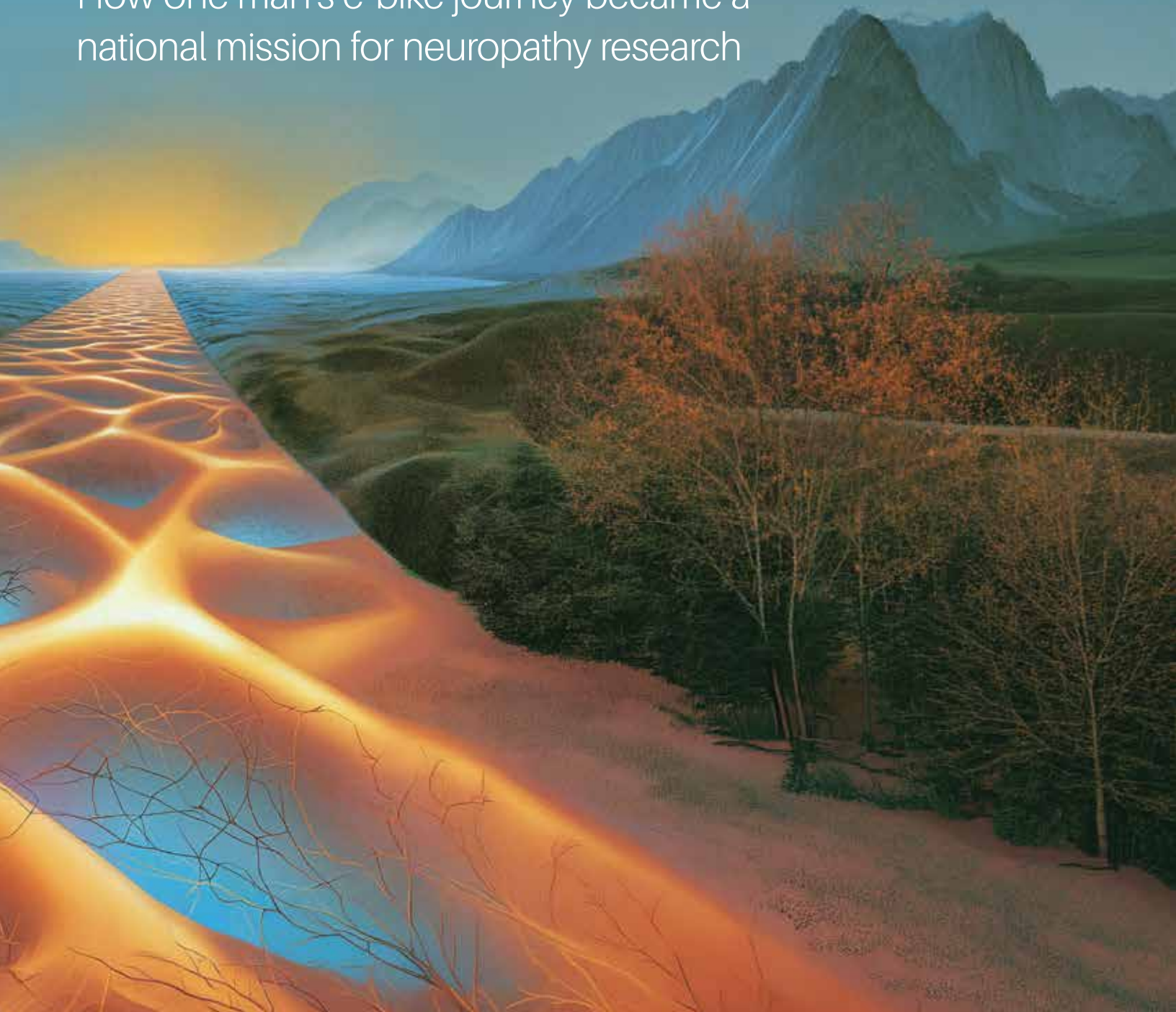
Dr. Blake Wilson

Is an electrical engineer who became a leading scientist in hearing research and neural prostheses. He is the inventor of many speech processing strategies used in modern cochlear implants, including CIS strategy.



The long ride back

How one man's e-bike journey became a national mission for neuropathy research





In 2018, Gregory Maassen was nearly bedridden by an agonizing, undiagnosed burning sensation that consumed his entire body. Eight years later, he completed a 7,460-mile e-bike journey across America that helped fuel a research revolution at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

The burning sensation started near the top of Maassen's left arm. Within a couple weeks, it had spread to his upper back and chest. Within a month, his entire body (from his ears to his feet) felt like it was on fire.

Maassen, 51 at the time, spent most days in bed but couldn't sleep. He saw doctor after doctor. Blood draws, an endoscopy and neurological evaluations yielded no answers. One physician even suggested the pain might be psychological. Meanwhile, Maassen grew sicker and more desperate. He feared he was dying.

More than a year into his ordeal, and nearly out of hope, he found Dr. Ahmet Hoke, a neurologist at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore. Dr. Hoke took one look at Maassen's symptoms and arrived at a diagnosis that had eluded every other clinician.

Small-fiber sensory neuropathy is a rare form of peripheral neuropathy that damages the smallest nerve fibers in the body. Because standard nerve conduction tests evaluate only large nerve fibers, the condition is frequently missed. A skin biopsy confirmed it in April 2019. Maassen believes tick bites triggered his condition, though neuropathy can also stem from diabetes, chemotherapy and autoimmune disorders.

Dr. Hoke prescribed medications to manage the pain, including a gabapentinoid and an antidepressant with nerve pain benefits. But it was his second prescription that stopped Maassen cold. Exercise.



Supported by the Merkin Peripheral Neuropathy and Nerve Regeneration (PNNR) Center at Johns Hopkins Medicine, Gregory Maassen embarked on a 7,460-mile e-bike tour departing from West Palm Beach, Florida.

"Are you out of your mind?" Maassen recalled thinking. He was so exhausted and sore that basic daily tasks felt insurmountable. The idea of working out seemed not just impractical, but cruel.

But Dr. Hoke was firm. Research shows that exercise can regenerate nerve fibers and meaningfully reduce chronic pain in neuropathy patients. With no other options and nothing to lose, Maassen, who had left his career

as a U.S. Agency for International Development contractor due to his illness, decided to try.

Swimming was too demanding. Hiking was worse. So he joined a local cycling group in Northwest Washington, D.C. made up mostly of retirees in their 60s and 70s, assuming the pace would be gentle. He couldn't keep up. But something caught his eye. Several riders were on e-bikes equipped with a battery and motor that ease resistance on hills while still requiring the rider to pedal, balance and steer.

Maassen bought one in September 2019. His first rides around his neighborhood

left him spent. But he noticed something else: His mood lifted. He kept going. Within weeks, the pain began to subside. The more he rode, the better his body felt.

"I never had a day that I said, 'Oh no, I have to do it again,'" he said.

From neighborhood rides to national mission

What began as a reluctant experiment became a calling. By December 2019, Maassen had launched an e-bike community group called E-Bike Lovers. By 2021, off his pain medication and having logged thousands of miles, he set his sights on something far more ambitious.

Only a couple years earlier, it would have been unthinkable for him to embark on a cross-country e-bike ride from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco along the historic Lincoln Highway. But he was determined to conquer this four-month road challenge to raise money and awareness for neuropathy research.

Even Dr. Hoke, who typically recommends walking or Pilates for his patients, admitted he thought Maassen was "nuts."

Maassen set out anyway, pulling an 80-pound trailer packed with camping gear, a drone, a camera, an orange safety vest, an electric toothbrush and jars of



creamy peanut butter. He rode through snowstorms and downpours, across deserts and mountain passes and miles of open cornfields, stopping each evening to track down an outlet to charge his bike. Averaging 65 miles a day over roughly 4,685 miles, he raised more than \$179,000 for neuropathy research from patients, neurologists, strangers along the route and loved ones back home.

Then, in 2026, Maassen went even further, literally.

Supported by the Merkin Peripheral Neuropathy and Nerve Regeneration (PNNR) Center at Johns Hopkins, he embarked on a 7,460-mile e-bike tour departing from West Palm Beach, Florida on March 1, 2026. He rolled into Santa Monica, California, on July 21, completing the longest and most impactful ride of his life.

Along the way, he connected with universities, research institutions, patient advocacy organizations and cycling communities from coast to coast, spreading awareness and the critical need for new peripheral neuropathy treatments.

Pedaling toward a cure

The funds Maassen has raised are already making a difference.

Dr. Hoke is using the support to develop therapies that could one day regenerate nerves as effectively as exercise does. This has the potential to transform outcomes for the estimated 20 million Americans living with peripheral neuropathy.

The Merkin PNNR Center at Johns Hopkins continues to build on the momentum of Maassen's journey through educational events, documentary screenings, community partnerships and expanded research initiatives. All of this is aimed at accelerating the path to better treatments.

Maassen, now 59, says this was his last cross-country ride. He made a promise to his wife, Janet, and their cat, Queenie, that he'd be home more. But when asked if he plans to hang up his helmet for good, his answer is immediate.

"That doesn't mean that I will stop cycling," he said.

For a man who once feared he'd never leave his bed again, keeping that helmet isn't really about cycling at all. It's a testament to the power of science, perseverance and one very good doctor's prescription.

THE JOURNEY BY THE NUMBERS



7,460

**MILES ON HIS
2026 E-BIKE TOUR**



4,685

**MILES ON
HIS EARLIER
JOURNEY**



1

**MISSION:
MOVING
RESEARCH
FORWARD**

The Merkin Peripheral Neuropathy and Nerve Regeneration Center at Johns Hopkins Medicine is supported through the generosity of Richard Merkin, M.D., founder and CEO of Heritage Provider Network. Visit hopkinsmedicine.org/neurology-neurosurgery/research/merkin-center to learn more about peripheral neuropathy research and how to support the center's mission.

BEATING THE ODDS

Catching hidden heart conditions before crisis strikes

New program helps identify patients who may benefit from heart monitoring before they experience a serious medical event.



For many, an undiagnosed heart rhythm condition (arrhythmia) can go completely unnoticed — until crisis strikes. Desert Oasis Healthcare (DOHC) is working to change that. The medical group is leveraging AI and cutting-edge patient data analysis to identify at-

risk people before arrhythmia leads to an ER visit or hospitalization.

With Predictive Arrhythmia Solutions™, an exclusive program developed by iRhythm Technologies that combines Lucem Health's Reveal Arrhythmia AI technology with iRhythm's advanced

cardiac monitoring service, DOHC gives care teams the insight needed to flag patients for further cardiac evaluation.

“Too often, patients weren’t learning they had a heart rhythm condition until they ended up in the emergency room or hospital,” said Tom Brazeal, Pharm.D., APh, BCACP, associate director of Technology and Process, Population Health and Prescription Management at DOHC. “We wanted to find a way to identify those patients earlier, when there is an opportunity to intervene sooner and improve outcomes.”

The new program makes that possible by analyzing existing health record data to pinpoint patients who may benefit from closer monitoring. Those patients can then be prescribed a Zio® ECG device, which delivers up to 14 days of continuous, uninterrupted cardiac monitoring, all while they go about their normal daily lives.

Following patient completion of the prescribed wear period, clinicians receive a comprehensive end-of-wear report with actionable insights generated by iRhythm's AI-powered service and curated by qualified cardiac technicians. The report helps support clinicians in making the right diagnosis with timely care.



“One of the most exciting opportunities in healthcare is the ability to use data, advanced AI and clinical expertise together in support of patient care,” said Quentin Blackford, president and CEO of iRhythm. “We’re proud to partner with Desert Oasis Healthcare as they implement Predictive Arrhythmia Solutions and continue advancing innovative approaches to population health and care delivery.”

To streamline the process for patients and providers, DOHC created a dedicated team to coordinate outreach, monitoring and follow-up care. Results are reviewed with patients through DOHC Cardiology services and communicated to the patient’s primary care provider to support coordinated care across the healthcare team.

“We tried to make it as seamless as possible,” Dr. Brazeal said. “Our team manages the process to help patients get the care they need while not creating an additional burden for physicians.”

By identifying potential heart rhythm issues earlier, DOHC hopes to reduce unnecessary hospital visits and increase long-term heart health in the communities they serve.

“At Desert Oasis Healthcare, we’re always looking for innovative ways to improve care,” said Dr. Brazeal. “This program supports our mission of keeping patients healthier, preventing avoidable hospitalizations and delivering the right care at the right time.”

KEYS TO THE COMMUNITY

Lancaster honors High Desert Medical Group's 45-year legacy of caring

When Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris bestowed a "key to the city" to Heritage Founder Dr. Richard Merkin, the gesture was more than symbolic. It also cemented a close collaboration with one of Los Angeles County's fastest-growing communities.

On June 23, at a benchmark Senior Expo presented by High Desert Medical Group (HDMG), the city formally recognized HDMG for its contributions to the quality of life in the communities served by the Antelope Valley's largest independent healthcare provider organization for the past 45 years.

Don Parazo, M.D., associate medical director of HDMG, who also serves on the elected Antelope Valley Hospital Medical Center Board, noted that HDMG's role is essential for maintaining and promoting healthy living for its older adult citizens, families, children and veterans.







“High Desert Medical Group maintains close relationships with both the City of Lancaster and the Antelope Valley Medical Center,” Dr. Parazo said. “We work together to ensure the people we take care of get the best healthcare possible.”

HDMG has been a pillar of Lancaster’s community programming that emerged from highly successful special events sponsorships. The Antelope Valley Senior Expo presented by HDMG served as one of the keystone annual events in the region. The expo is attended by thousands every year who enter the gates at the Antelope Valley Fairground for a day of no-cost healthcare services such as flu

vaccinations, blood pressure screening and bone density testing, along with entertainment and nearly 100 healthcare vendors.

To help bring thousands of older adult citizens together at the HDMG Senior Expo, the medical group has engaged major celebrities that include Priscilla Presley, Tony Orlando, Dodger legend Steve Garvey, Shirley MacLaine and Rita Moreno. The city assists the event by sponsoring a free lunch for 1,500 people and providing spotlighted media coverage.

HDMG is also a major presence at local events such as the iconic California Poppy Festival and is an

ongoing partner with the Los Angeles County Senior Center in Lancaster. They run several support services through their Senior Wellness Center on the medical group’s campus.

“We always try to put HDMG front and center of community at big celebrations the city hosts, like the ‘Boo-le-ward,’ at Halloween, ‘Magical Christmas on the Boulevard,’ ‘Celebrate America’ and the Woodland Desert Preserve senior exercise programs,” said HDMG Administrator Rafael Gonzalez. “We try to be out where people can find us, so they understand we are their accessible healthcare choice.”

The partnership between HDMG and the city runs deep. The goal is to keep neighborhoods healthy and thriving. Some of their most successful programs include Community Partner and active aging events such as Movers and Shakers and Senior Walking at the Desert Woodland Preserve.

When COVID-19 struck, HDMG stepped up, helping the city deliver thousands of lifesaving vaccinations to those who needed them most. And when a contract dispute with a major health insurer threatened to disrupt the care so many depended on, HDMG resolved a negotiation with the support of Mayor Parris.

All of this is a testament to just how integral HDMG has become to the heart and health of the Antelope Valley.

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