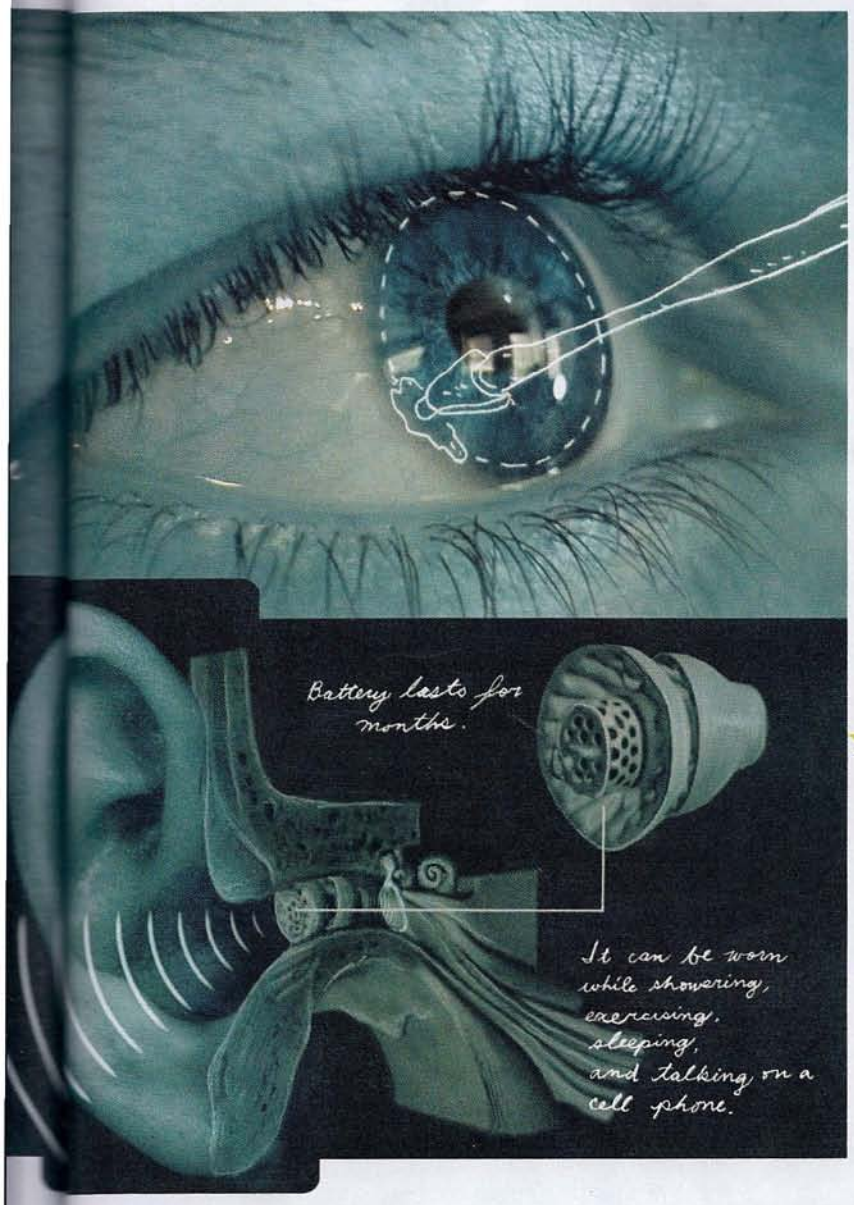

are also betting that Sawhney, whose last company, Confluent Surgical, was bought by Tyco Healthcare for $245 million, will hit the mark again.

I-ZIP should be available in the United States by early 2010. Sawhney says he isn't much concerned about reimbursement issues—for now, he is focusing on "premium" procedures that are largely paid out of pocket. Sawhney is looking at the treatment of glaucoma patients down the road. His plan: rather than patients using daily applications of eye drops—a regimen fraught with problems of noncompliance and misdosage—those with glaucoma will get their medication automatically via tiny gel plugs inserted in ducts in the eyelids.

THE EARS

Finally, after years of effort—an invisible hearing aid

THE LYRIC HEARING AID

THE HEARING AID has long been viewed as a signifier of personal obsolescence. No wonder, then, that manufacturers of hearing aids have tried for years—and without much success—to make models that fit deep inside the ear, where they cannot be seen. After seven years of stealth development, Newark, California–based InSound Medical appears to have pulled that off. Released in May 2008 and introduced to the public with a high-profile spot on ABC's *Good Morning America* last July, the Lyric hearing aid—designed by a team headed by Robert Schindler, one of the pioneers of the cochlear implant—can be worn 24 hours a day for months at a time, sort of like extended-wear contact lenses. Made of a soft foam material and powered by a proprietary battery that lasts for months, not weeks, the Lyric fits deep in the bony portion of the ear canal close to the eardrum, delivering high-quality sound. Unlike other devices, it can be worn while showering, exercising, sleeping, and talking on a cell phone. A combination of precise fit and antimicrobial agents helps prevent infection.

InSound's business model is also different: With other hearing aids, you buy the device outright (at a cost of about $2,000 and up for each ear for high-end digital models) and expect it to last three to five years. With the Lyric device, users buy an annual "subscription" for about $1,650, which covers replacements, visits to the audiologist, and automatic upgrades when new models come out.

The subscription model makes the first-generation device more expensive than traditional hearing aids. But David Thrower, the company's CEO, is convinced customers will find the added features well worth the price. About 80 percent of the approximately 3,000 Lyric users have reupped for a second year of service. "Most people don't like to get hearing aids," Thrower says. "This is a hearing aid that people really love."