

CPAP changed my life- An OSA Sufferers Tale.

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This is a story of 15 years of pain, embarrassment and gradual health deterioration until a real expert and CPAP solved my problems. Some 15 years ago I was made aware by the examples below that my snoring was getting worse. It was so bad my wife demanded single beds or a separate bedroom. In the hot summer nights our bedroom window remained open and neighbours on the other side of the street started passing comments that I was “giving it a bit of welly last night”. Another neighbour, the local beat policeman, started whistling every time he saw me “Good Vibrations – a-la Beach Boys” I then decided I needed help and saw my GP; who firstly tried prescribing nasal sprays to assist breathing plus various other potions all to no avail. Finally he sent me to Harley Street to see the great “White Specialist.”

After examination he diagnosed a small airway and a “*Uvulopalatopharyngoplasty (UPPP)*” was called for – *to the uninitiated – ritual throat disembowelment!!*

He even said that I would stop snoring. After much deliberation I promptly went to a fancy London Teaching Hospital that actually resembled a scene from “Dickens Bleak House” and suffered a horrible painful, blood-letting operation, to open my airway.

I was informed that this surgery removes the uvula and the lower edge of the soft palate is trimmed. If present, the tonsils are generally removed and tissues around the tonsils trimmed. It can be done separately or in conjunction with other treatments, depending on where in the airway the obstructions occur.

There are the usual surgical risks involved with this surgery. Notable ones are general anesthetic (depresses breathing reflex and can be risky in people with breathing problems like sleep apnoea), swelling of the airway, need for pre -and post-operative medications (may depress the breathing reflex), bleeding, and significant pain lasting up to several weeks.

Yes it was just like that, but to be fair the snoring disappeared – for a year!! And reappeared gradually worsening and unbeknown to me I was suffering the onset of OSA (Obstructive Sleep Apnoea).

More embarrassing moments – The snoring was so bad people on aircraft would move seats, indeed on one business trip coupled with the effects of alcohol, following a ship survey completion celebration, I managed to empty a whole row and neighbouring aisle of passengers. This certainly achieved weird looks from the aircrew. This did have one advantage I usually got more space on the aircraft – providing it was not full. I subsequently had to warn passengers of the problem when seated next to them.

Whilst chairing a conference in Singapore I fell asleep during the presentation of technical papers loudly snoring into the microphone in front of me. Whilst teaching in America I fell asleep in front of the class during a short quiet reading spell. Even the dog, which shares our marital bedroom moved out to sleep on the landing or the other side of the bedroom – away from me.

Again I was referred to another so-called Specialist/Consultant who carried out an examination (at vast private medical plan expense) and diagnosed that I needed to lose weight and laser surgery was out of the question, as the UPPP operation was so radical he feared burning through my brain. Variations on potions were prescribed including Amphetamines (happy pills better known as Speed!). I did like these, but it caused serious problems when confronted with customs searches at airports and ports not least of all the interesting health effects. These potions were soon terminated. The condition worsened. I became irritable and started to fly off the handle at a moments notice, fall asleep whilst holding cups of tea, frequently and unfairly row with my wife who is a very patient person. Over the years I started to compensate for my condition. Short ever-increasing naps on long journeys were one method, timing meetings for ever-shorter periods, etc

I was experiencing other clinical problems, which my GP and I did not associate with the OSA i.e., raised blood pressure and nocturia (Increased need to urinate at night – 7-8 times on average,)

Three years ago I was diagnosed with a suspect Lymphoma of the throat. Amusingly this was after referral to a superb ENT specialist at my local hospital (Royal Gwent Newport) for a hearing test. This specialist carried out a thorough examination and prescribed a biopsy on the suspected growth – to much relief it turned out to be inflammatory tissue that had grown back from the UPPP operation. (The sample now resides in a glass jar at the University Teaching hospital) Fame at last.

Once I had returned from the operating theatre I experienced a “Crash” to wake up with lovely nurses holding my hand and a very concerned doctor monitoring all the dials and instruments wired to me. It transpired that due to the apnoea attacks I was unable to expel the residues of anaesthetic and this caused the crash. (or at least this is what was explained to me.) Again the superb ENT Consultant fortunately recognized the symptoms and referred me to his colleague and “Real Specialist” Dr Mellissa Hack. Due to the small size and very busy activity of the Gwent Sleep Centre it took a year before I was sent for a sleep study. The day (or night arrived) and I turned up at the sleep clinic to be shown a comfortable but small room – what a difference this was in comparison to the Dickens Alms House in London and this was on the NHS!! I was even allowed (my supply) of a small nightcap (a superb 12 year old Glenlivet) to assist the aiding of sweet dreams - the sleep unit even had an excellent mineral water to compliment the Glenlivet – very thoughtful. .

At my command (quite nice really) they wired me up to the magic computer next door and I was allowed to sleep, even though video, infrared and all sorts of “secret gizmos” were filming me. I felt that I did not sleep at all, however, I am assured that I did sleep and produce the desired results. Once wakened, I was offered suitable (non alcoholic) beverage and breakfast and was allowed home only to return a few weeks later for the results. The day arrived and I was summoned to the lovely Dr Hack a charming lady specialist who has an excellent bedside manner to be told my fortune (diagnosis). I was suffering from acute OSA and CPAP (Continuous Positive Air Pressure) was prescribed.

I was promised the following – yes, yes, heard it all before oh ye of little faith!!

- A Good nights sleep
- Lower Blood Pressure
- Less nighttime toilet activity
- A more active and alert brain.

I was then sent to the inner sanctum of Sister Jeanette Richards to be kitted out with one of these mysterious CPAP machines. Again, a lovely lady who also has an excellent bedside manner. (Must stop this as my wife will start getting concerned) and fitted me up with suitable machine and “Darth Vader Mask. Nothing was too much trouble, she explained patiently all my questions including the stupid ones and she even gave me her telephone number (work number of course). I was then sent on my way.

Well the effects of using CPAP were in my opinion miraculous. I found the slight hissing air sound relaxing and soon drifted off into a deep and sound sleep I slept the first night the sleep of the dead, absolutely perfect - it was wonderful. Not one little snore. I awakened for the first time in many long years, refreshed and feeling raring to go. I only got up once during the night to use the toilet, again marvelous. Only two problems – my wife was so used to me snoring and found the room too quiet, so she did not sleep well for the first night of my CPAP use, and the dog looked bewildered when I was fitted up with the mask. Subsequently with continuous 6 months and more use of my whirring machine on the bedside and Darth Vader mask, my blood pressure has dropped, I no longer fall asleep at critical moments, I no longer have to use the toilet at night 6-7 times and finally my brain activity has returned to normal. Dr Hack is the first Doctor I have encountered that told the truth and is a REAL EXPERT. I can confirm that CPAP has changed my life for the better however, the wearing of the Darth Vader mask does dampen the ardour – must remember to remove it next time.

So Why not contact the Welsh SAS Patient support Group for advice and help.

If you are interested in joining our group, attending a meeting or just chatting to someone who has sleep apnoea, please do not hesitate to make contact and you can do so by ringing the Secretary or one of the helpline members. Alternatively contact the Welsh SAS by e.mail