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1

The many tentacles of the “apnoea octopus”

Sleep apnoea is a pause in breathing during one’s sleep pattern. The word *apnoea* (US **apnea**) medically means a temporary cessation of breathing. The word comes from the Greek word *apnoea* which, in turn, comes from *apnous* meaning breathless. It can last several seconds or several minutes. In extreme cases it deprives the brain, heart and other essential organs of oxygenated air necessary for the proper functioning of our body. As we all know, our body and mind need the restorative effects of a good night’s sleep.

I can recall, when I was in my thirties, being roused to partial consciousness by my wife because I wasn’t breathing. “Paul – breathe!” she would exhort from some far distant valley. After processing my scrambled thoughts I rolled over and wondered what she was carrying on about. Invariably, I would later discover, I had been snoring whilst lying on my back...until I stopped breathing. However, I was largely oblivious to what was happening – let alone *why* it was happening.

In later years I would learn that snoring is the body’s attempt to slow down the rate of breathing. If we overbreathe or hyperventilate, we deplete our lungs of the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) necessary to regulate our breathing and maintain the pH (or proper acid/alkaline balance) of our blood. The maintaining of the correct pH levels is essential for all living organisms.

I would also learn that the sudden and abrupt interruption to my breathing was a signal from my body that its lungs needed to replenish the amount of CO₂ necessary for efficient breathing.

During my thirties I was overweight. I was married with two young children. My wife worked irregular hours and I was a self-employed lawyer. The recession in 1991 forced me into sole practice. Life was challenging enough without the debilitation caused by sleep apnoea.

Unconsciously I continuously breathed through my mouth both day and night – like an animated goldfish. But just as a goldfish cannot be sustained by breathing through its mouth, neither could I be adequately sustained. Yet I had done so all throughout my childhood and teenage years and right through until my late forties. The only time I can recall it ever bringing itself into focus was when I was a teenager and a friend of mine punched my arm when I ridiculed him for breathing noisily through his nose. We

were at a funeral and the noise made by his whistling nose jarred with the otherwise funereal silence expected on the day. Also, his nose breathing annoyed me. It struck me as an unnatural aberration. Didn't everyone breathe through their mouth?

Yet now I would no sooner breathe through my mouth than put my hand in a frypan of hot oil. In the space of nine months – a mere pregnant pause – I managed to overturn a lifetime habit of mouth breathing and convert to exclusively breathing through my nose.

With the benefit of hindsight I can now reflect on how sleep apnoea impacted on my quality of life. As a young man in my thirties I would often fall asleep in front of the television in the evening. I also experienced, on more than one occasion, episodes where my heavy eyelids would stay closed for many seconds whilst night driving. At times my car would swerve off the road forcing me to quickly correct the steering wheel. I would wind down the window and drive with a wall of cold air reviving my sleepy brain.

The worrying aspect was that these episodes sometimes occurred when my children were in the car.

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My life was full. I was both managing and conducting my legal practice, bringing up children, maintaining a relationship and looking after sick parents. Consequently it was easy to push aside those health issues which didn't immediately confront me or prevent me from functioning at all. Sleep apnoea can be surreptitious as, depending on its severity, it may only slightly or moderately retard your functionality. I could largely ignore its deleterious effects as I was still able to function or "cope" even though, with hindsight, not to my optimum level.

I believe that during the three years from 2005 to 2008 sleep apnoea began to assert itself more prominently. During a time of emotional and physical stress bad breathing habits began to exact a toll. At one point the combination of antidepressants and sleeping pills with sleep apnoea meant that I was only having two to four hours of sleep each night. It was a rollercoaster of nightmares which I can barely recall thanks to the passage of time and the cloudiness of an unclear memory.

Surprising it wasn't until 17 June 2008 when my treating doctor first diagnosed the possibility of a breathing disorder, in particular sleep apnoea. I had attended a Council of Adult Education (CAE) seminar on breathing habits a few weeks earlier. Consequently I realised that I needed to undertake a sleep study.

It also led me to make further enquiries which would ultimately prove to be life-changing.

Purchase the full copy of *Breathless Sleep...no more* by Paul Rodriguez
at www.learntosleepwell.com

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