

Waking up to why I nearly died



Chris Coleman, City News 27 June 2017

“Get some sleep. With the threat of one ‘good’ heartbeat killing me. Or the possibility of being electrified the next day. Yeah, right...

There are some historic dates that are instantly recognisable. You know, dates such as November 22, 1963*, or July 20, 1969**. For me March 11, 2011 is one of those days. Not because it was the day of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, but because it's the day I nearly died. I was needed at work early that morning and was feeling tired when I arrived a bit after 6am. There was nothing unusual about that, as I always felt tired in the mornings. It was my job to collect the papers, so I took the short walk – maybe 150 metres – to get them, and the newsagent said I was looking a bit unwell. I dismissed it as tiredness and being a Friday.

As I reached the office front door I broke out in a sweat from head to toe and started to feel very light headed. Instinctively, I checked my pulse and felt it going way faster than I could count. Not exactly a good feeling, I can tell you. Less than five minutes later I was in the care of paramedics who hooked me up to the machine that goes “ping”. And it started pinging between 170 and 250 beats a minute. I was soon in an ambulance and on the road to hospital with lights and sirens going.

In the emergency department I was hooked up to a bigger machine that went “ping” so much they turned the pinger off. Over the following 12 or so hours the medics tried several different things to get my heart back to normal. If I lay perfectly still, it would go below 100, but the slightest movement would send it skyrocketing again. It turned out I was experiencing atrial fibrillation (AF) and I was told several times why AF is a bad thing. In

short, it can cause a blood clot in your heart and with one good pump it can go into your brain, at which point it's game over.

It continued through the day, and some 15 hours later a doctor said I should try to get some sleep. He went on to say that if the AF was still going in the morning that they'd try shocking my heart back to normal. Get some sleep. With the threat of one “good” heartbeat killing me. Or the possibility of being electrified the next day. Yeah, right... Ironically, within minutes of falling asleep, my heart action returned to normal.

Over the following weeks, I was subjected to a barrage of tests to find the cause. Eventually, the heavy snoring I'd been doing for years became the chief suspect. A sleep study (where they connected me up to a million wires and told me to sleep) ensued. This led to the discovery that due to sleep apnoea, every hour while I was asleep, I stopped breathing around 80 times. For up to 30 seconds.

If you don't get how bad that is, try doing it while you're awake. The net effect was a steady drop of the oxygen level in my blood through the night, making my heart work harder. From there, one particularly bad night was enough to put my heart under more strain than it could take. Bingo! AF! And near death! I was advised to go on a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machine. Despite the initial discomfort of trying to sleep with a mask, it took all of two nights for me to wake up in the morning not feeling tired. A follow-up sleep study showed I was sleeping almost uninterrupted through the night. My blood pressure went down, my fitness went up to the point where I could do 10 kilometres on almost any device in under 50 minutes.

So here's the thing. If you – or someone you know and/or love – snores, don't muck around. Get it checked out. It might just save a life.

**Assassination of President John F Kennedy.*

***Man lands on the moon*

Apnoea: The dream of a good night's sleep

John Thistleton, Canberra Times 16 April 2014

David Noble had no trouble nodding off to sleep, the problem was sometimes he was driving his car. On regular trips to Sydney, Mr Noble's wife Tamara would look at him and ask: "Are you asleep?" As well, the moment the Fyshwick businessman stopped being busy at work he would have to fight to stay awake.

The problem is not uncommon. Port Macquarie businessman Michael Cusato fell asleep after he switched his Cessna 210 to auto-pilot and listened to country and western music on a flight from Port Macquarie to Bankstown airport. When he realized where he was he was well into the flightpaths of jets. The episode in September last year is under investigation.

Poor alertness causes an estimated 25,000 serious road accidents in Australia every year. Fortunately Mr Noble became aware of his sleep apnoea before he joined the statistics. "I was not as focused at work, I would forget things, I wasn't as accurate as I had been in the past," Mr Noble said.

While seeking help for another condition, he was also referred to Dr Grant Willson, a physiotherapist and sleep clinic director. Overnight sleep monitoring revealed he was experiencing 97 blockages an hour. "That means, effectively, I wasn't sleeping at all. I might have my eyes closed, but I wasn't getting any sleep," Mr Noble said.

Dr Willson said while more people were undergoing sleep study, doctors and the community needed to be educated about the problem. "We need to make people aware persistent snoring is not normal and that apnoea, high blood pressure, unrefreshing sleep, persistent tiredness and nocturia (getting up to the toilet at night) may be suggestive of sleep apnoea and should be investigated." He expects treatment take-up will grow substantially because studies show the rates of sleep apnoea are huge and have increased over the past 20 years, probably due to weight increase.

Dr Carol Huang of the Department of Respiratory Medicine, Canberra Hospital, says

sleep apnoea affects 25 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women. "The majority of our patients come complaining of snoring," Dr Huang said. "Sometimes their partners complain that they stop breathing during sleep, daytime sleepiness, sometimes just irritability, mood disturbance. "We sometimes get referrals where people are not sleepy but are complaining of poor concentration, poor memory."

Prescribed CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) treatment, Mr Noble straps on a mask each night across his nose, attached to a machine pushing air through tubing to the mask. The air then passes through the nose and into the throat, where the slight pressure keeps the upper airway open.

"Within a week I was feeling 100 times better. Refreshed, ready to go, that's a hell of a difference to someone waking up tired, with headaches, just not ready to go. "It means I can get on with my life, get everything done.

"I no longer cause my wife any grief whatsoever in terms of panicking about whether I am going to fall asleep at the wheel, in the middle of a conversation, too tired to get up and do anything."