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Catch a wave of ear cleaning

Surfer's hearing problem can be seen in graphic reality on Internet site

By KELLY SHIERS Staff Reporter

Lance Moore remembers sitting in his doctor's office, waiting to hear if he'd ever surf again.

Hear — Odd choice of word, there.

But it was his hearing, or lack of it, that was the problem. It's why he sought medical help after years of trying to cope with recurring sinus infections and a growing dullness in his ears.

"I would have dreams, literally, of wanting to drill my head out because it would drive me nuts," the Dartmouth man remembered in a recent interview. "I just couldn't hear."

In his 20s at the time, the young man had a sinking feeling his problem was the result of his love of surfing, which began when he was 17. A competitive surfer, he traveled the world to ride perfect waves. He runs his own surf shop in Halifax. He "pretty much lived to go surfing."

But he couldn't put off his fears any longer. He knew all those years of exposure to cold water might have done damage.

The question was, how much?

Plenty, as it turns out.

Mr. Moore was suffering from ear canal exostosis — also known as surfer's ear. It's a condition in which repeated and prolonged exposure to cold water stimulates bone growth in the ear canal, eventually causing the canal to narrow.

By 30, he had his first operation.

In the half dozen years since, he's had two more — most recently in January — to remove the extra bone.

Now, with help from his doctor, Mr. Moore has given thousands of people a close-up, albeit graphic, look at the condition that's plagued him by sharing his experiences on surfdonkey.ca, an Internet show he created with his brother, Craig.

On the website, viewers tune in during a checkup with his surgeon, Dr. Ian Dempsey. They hear the doctor explain what surfer's ear is, watch him vacuum dried bits of blood from the ear and hear about the procedure used to drill the bone down to its original diameter.

So far, the episode has gotten a "huge response," Mr. Moore said.

Surfer's ear "hasn't been talked about that much in the surfing community all over the world," he said. "Now that we've put it on the website, we've had something like 50,000 downloads. . . . I think that show's given a lot of people awareness."

Dr. Dempsey had no qualms about getting involved with the Internet project.

"It's not like I'm trying to hide any trade secrets," he laughed, adding that his patient — whose idea it was — is a "pretty persuasive guy."

Dr. Dempsey said surfer's ear isn't the same as swimmer's ear, a more common infection of the skin lining the ear canal.

Many people with surfer's ear might not even know they have it, unless the canal gets so narrow that wax and water are trapped inside. At its worst, the condition can lead, as it did in Mr. Moore's case, to hearing loss.

Dr. Manohar Bance, an ear surgeon and Dalhousie Medical School professor, said surfer's ear doesn't just affect surfers. In fact, anyone who spends a great deal of time in water, including swimmers, can be susceptible to it.

The vast majority of cases don't require surgery, he said.

"I just try to leave them alone as much as possible, but every once in a while you can't do that because it's just causing too (many) problems — mostly trapping stuff and getting infected."

The doctors agree that avoiding surfer's ear isn't easy.

Ear plugs and hoods designed to keep the cold water from getting into ears do help, but Dr. Dempsey said those kinds of precautions "are something you have to do routinely" in order to be effective.

Mr. Moore said the surgeries helped his hearing immediately.

Because he was born with narrower ear canals, he's especially conscientious about doing more damage. He said he pays more attention to his body, while encouraging others not to wait to have their ear problems checked out by a doctor.

"I love surfing and I still go surfing, but I'm a lot more careful now. I'm much more aware of what's going on," he said. "I do wear earplugs. I also put lubricant in my ears.

"I take care of myself and, if I'm sick, I don't go surfing."

(kshiers@herald.ca)

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lance moore Longtime surfer