

NOW HEAR THIS!

by
Thayer
Walker

Throughout my 12 years of surfing, I've managed to avoid the sport's most significant hazards—curious sharks, pugnacious locals, coral reefs sharp enough to cut diamond—with nary a stitch.

So when I went to the doctor last year complaining of an ear infection I had figured that free diving, not surfing, was the culprit. After all, surfing was my one-way ATM and all I had to do was paddle out to cash in. Until, that is, my doctor's diagnosis revealed a hidden expense that had spent years swelling like inflationary interest: surfer's ear.

I was a prime candidate for the condition, "exostoses," as it's called in the medical world. I grew up spending my days in Northern California's 53-degree water and never wore earplugs. They're uncomfortable, I reasoned, and tend to steer otherwise intelligent conversations into a chorus of "WHATs?" and "HUHs?" screamed at Who-concert decibels. I figured the risk of exostoses was minimal and worth the comfort and convenience of surfing without earplugs.

My left ear, however, didn't second that notion. As it turns out, ears don't favor habitual cold-water enemas so, for reasons that are still a medical mystery, the body responds to the chill by pumping blood to warm the area. This increased blood flow stimulates bone growth. When renegade bone growth finally fills in the ear canal, one theory goes, the inner ear (home to the semicircular canals, the body's balance center) is protected from the cold. Problem solved, as long as you don't mind chronic ear infections and hearing loss.

There's only one problem with that theory, explains my 37-year-old surgeon, Dr. Sumeer "Mickey" Gupta: "It doesn't make sense. Cold water doesn't injure the middle or inner ear. Exostoses is a reflexive tissue action gone awry." Like Vin

Diesel's continued ability to land movie roles, no one really knows why it happens, it just does. It's an enigma wrapped in bone wrapped in my ear canal.

It is estimated that 70 to 80 percent of surfers have some form of exostoses, but sailors, divers, kayakers, and swimmers also suffer from the condition. The growth transcends not just water sports but borders and epochs; it has been found in ears from Afghanistan to New Zealand and South Dakota to southern Chile, where the oldest evidence of exostoses dates back 9,000 years.

Early medical literature attributed surfer's ear to causes as varied as syphilis and excessive alcohol consumption. Treatments were a thumbscrew away from torture. In the 1870s, one favored technique required doctors to run electrical currents through needles and into the mountain of aural bone growth and then cut out the offending chunks with scissors. At least one patient suffered facial paralysis.

Medical enlightenment arrived a few years later in the form of a dental drill, but even this wagon train of progress ran on square wheels. Anesthetic was by no means guaranteed and procedures that might take an hour today were sometimes conducted over weeks, with sessions limited by the patient's tolerance for pain.

While anesthesia, thankfully, has become commonplace, drilling is falling out of favor in some circles because it can cause high-frequency hearing loss. Instead, Dr. Gupta tells me in the examination room, he'll be using tools that span both ends of the technological spectrum.

Cribbing from the cavemen, who used similar tools to bang petroglyphs into stone, Dr. Gupta explains that he will

wield a small hammer and an even smaller, one-millimeter-wide chisel, to "shave down the bone like cheese."

Despite the miniaturized tools, the ear canal isn't exactly a spacious working environment, which is where the state-of-the-art six-figure binocular microscope comes into play. "It's amazing," says the giddy doctor. "Looking through a 4x enlargement on the microscope, you can remove a 1/2-centimeter piece of bone in 50 pieces."

There are two ways to conduct the surgery. The post-auricular approach involves the surgeon making an incision behind the ear and flipping it forward, excavating the ear canal through the freshly cut doggie door. Dr. Gupta won't bother with this swordplay, instead using the transcanal method, which requires him to go in straight through the ear canal.

As we stand before a poster of a giant cross-sectioned ear, Dr. Gupta runs through the dangers with an unsettling comprehensiveness. Some of the most important bits of the human body sit within a few millimeters of this mining operation, including the brain, the balance center, and the nerve that controls facial muscles. The stakes aren't life and death, but the consequences of a mistake are severe.

Adding to the degree of difficulty, these ossified stalactites and stalagmites have closed my canal by 95 percent, making my condition "obliterative." Dr. Gupta won't be able to see

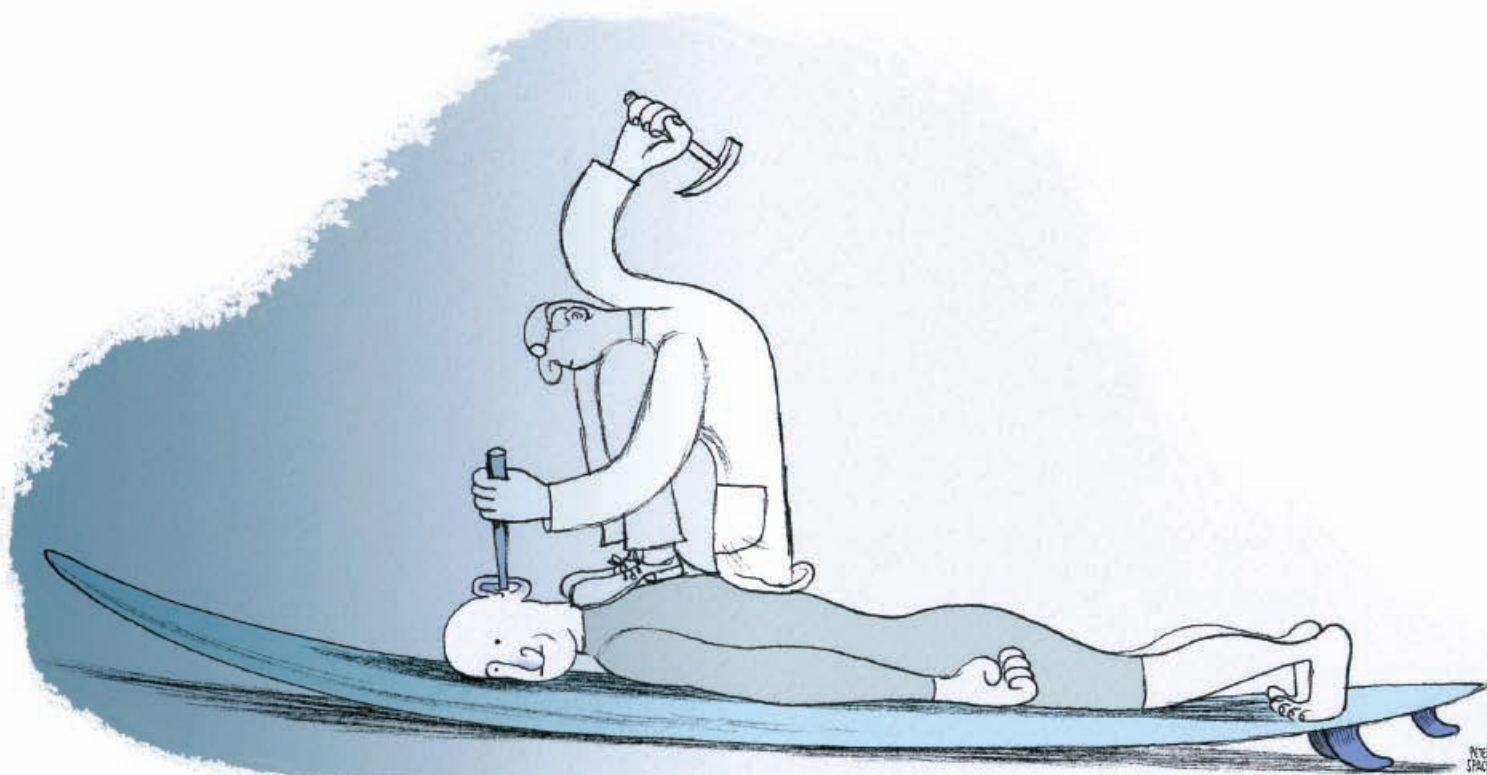
the ear drum, a reference point that helps him get oriented, which means he'll be chiseling blindly into my skull for 45 minutes before he can remove enough bone to see clearly.

"If there's one point surfers should understand," Dr. Gupta chastises, "it's that they shouldn't put this off until their ears are nearly totally occluded. It makes the surgery much more difficult and undoubtedly increases the risks for complications."

It's disconcerting news, but I appreciate the honesty. Besides, Dr. Gupta's office looks like a jungle, and a fresh-water fish tank sits on his desk, so it appears that he's pretty good at keeping things healthy.

A few weeks later we put that theory to test. A nurse mercifully puts me under, and after two hours and 39 minutes of surgery, I awake groggy but with a full range of facial motion. I'm temporarily hard of hearing in my left ear because it's packed with surgical sponges that will dissolve on their own over the course of a few weeks. Ultimately, I make a full recovery, but my case is severe enough to keep me out of the water for six weeks.

As the anesthetic wears off, I test my gradually returning mental acuity with an exercise of frustrating mathematics: in terms of money, pain, and time out of the water, how much did surfer's ear cost? A lot more than a pair of \$15 earplugs. ☹



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