

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### DECOMPRESSION ILLNESS SEQUELAE

7 Beach Rd, Milford  
Auckland  
New Zealand  
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Dear Editor

I was most interested to read Dr Acott's paper in the June issue of the Journal, "Decompression Illness Sequelae in Tuna Farm Divers".<sup>1</sup> This study identified persisting problems in over one third of cases (9/21). Dr Acott kindly referred to papers from New Zealand describing similar post-treatment sequelae.<sup>2,3</sup>

I followed up the divers treated at HMNZS Philomel for decompression illness (DCI) during 1987 and identified that approximately one third had persisting physical problems and another third had less serious problems adversely affecting their domestic and work lives.<sup>2,3</sup> I was alerted to this latter group by the several requests for help from the spouses and work mates of patients whom we had classified as being cured. I attempted to describe the variable symptoms as "personality changes" and "mild depression" together with "soft neurology" and as Dr Acott describes, "fatigue" and "myalgia". The head injury team kindly assessed two of our cases and confirmed their neuropsychological difficulties.<sup>3</sup> Overall it is my impression that, of the diving accident patients treated in New Zealand, one third are left with physical problems (some rather minor). Furthermore, the majority of this physically injured group, together with another third of patients, suffered a change in personality as identified by their family members. We all recognise other grumpy divers and difficult fellow SPUMS members!

Maybe there is a physical basis for their personality traits? At the Safe Diving Symposium in Cairns in 1994, Dr David Youngblood commenting on one of the patients we presented,<sup>4</sup> mentioned that the aerospace industry was also aware that, occasionally, aviators and astronauts "went off in subtle ways" and that "when recognised they were usually promoted to a non-active role".

If this small amount of data is representative of decompression illness causing a change in personality and other subtle changes, then it poses a major problem to the sports diving and related industries. I congratulate Dr Acott for proceeding with further investigations in this area.

Unfortunately very, very few divers with DCI have had a neuropsychiatric examination before they have their diving accident so there is no base line for comparison with their post-treatment personality.

Adequate follow up of divers after treatment is difficult because of the drop out rate. I suggest that hyperbaric units should routinely include interviews with partners, spouses and work mates to find out whether the cases reported in the above papers are unusual or relatively common.

Allan Sutherland.

### References

- 1 Acott C. Decompression Illness Sequelae in Tuna Farm Divers. *S Pacific Underwater Med Soc J* 2000; 30 (2): 112-114
- 2 Sutherland A. Diving accident cases treated at HMZNS Philomel in 1988. *S Pacific Underwater Med Soc J* 1990; 20 (1): 4-5
- 3 Sutherland A, Veale A and Gorman D. Neuropsychological problems in 24 recreational divers one year after treatment for decompression illness. *S Pacific Underwater Med Soc J* 1993; 23 (1): 7-11
- 4 Chapman-Smith P. Several case studies from general practice. *Safe Limits Symposium Proceedings*. Brisbane: Queensland Workplace Health and Safety, 1994; 108-112. Reprinted *S Pacific Underwater Med Soc J* 1996; 26 (3): 212-215

### Key Words

Decompression illness, letter, medical conditions and problems, treatment sequelae.

### A CHRISTMAS PRESENT ?

8 Sloane Street  
Hobart, Tasmania 7000  
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Dear Editor

I wrote the piece below before I saw the review of *Stars Beneath the Sea* by Trevor Norton on pages 90-91 of the June Journal. I enjoyed reading the book, which I think will make an excellent Christmas present for divers and non-divers alike, so much that I compiled a rough index for my own use. My only complaint about the book is that it does not have an index. I want to make mine available to all members of SPUMS to help them find what is where in the book. I hope that you will publish my review and somehow make the index available.

Trevor Norton is Professor of Marine Biology at Liverpool University. This book is not about echinoderms however, though some of its protagonists appear to share the survival qualities of that hardy phylum. *Stars Beneath the Sea* is in fact a potted history of diving and hyperbaric research, seen through a series of personal profiles rather