

MORE PERILS OF THE DEEP

by Mike Meaney

The decision to swim involves a host of complicated decisions, starting with finding out what conditions are like in the Cove, gauging the availability of parking, selecting the most stylish swim suit and the like. In addition one has to weigh the hazards to nautical navigation: the presence or absence of great whites, whales, jellyfish, legions of dead and stinking squid, the possibility of being run over by a jet skier whose blood alcohol is about twice the legal limit, or as Cyrise Calvin has recently experienced, avoiding the unpleasantness associated with hypothermia and death.

Once that checklist is complete, then you have to conduct a personal inventory: what kind of shape am I in-is this a day for a pier swim, or maybe just a flip turn at the quarter mile buoy, saving enough energy to get back up the stairs.

Another item that might be helpful in the pre-swim checklist is a complete physical, including a cardiac check, which means a treadmill test, also known as a stress echo test.

My recent experience might be of some help to others, particularly those in the well-seasoned or somewhat older crowd. In short, being in good shape, having reasonable cholesterol levels, reasonable blood pressure and the like are not enough to prevent heart disease, no matter how much one swims, or how well one is still able to fit into a Speedo.

In my case I attributed the back pain I was having to the thankless task of moving boxes of books around in conjunction with a charity project, and the occasional shortness of breath to not having done my customary evening walks in quite a few months, and so on and so on. The correct answer to those symptoms should have been “angina”. But since I have always had good health, gotten yearly physicals (without cardiac checks), that was the farthest thing from my mind. Plus, I clearly stink at self-diagnosis.

Through a series of lucky circumstances, I ended up first in a stress echo test, which I flunked by a country mile, and then, instead of going to San Francisco for several days on business as I had planned, I ended up in surgery for an almost totally blocked coronary artery, as well as an almost totally blocked carotid artery.

The cardiologist described these conditions as the “silent killer” and the “widow maker”. I also thought those terms were reserved for use by sixth grade boys to describe the presence of post-lunch gaseous expulsions in a classroom.

I was lucky, but the statistics for heart disease in this country are not only disheartening, but more importantly, point to a huge number of people who are not so lucky, and either suffer a serious stroke or fatal heart attack as a result of untreated heart disease.

The “B” buoy is not the place to find out for the first time that you have coronary issues.

With me, none of the classic indicators was present, other than heredity: I never had pain radiating down my left arm,



Mike Meaney and wife, Terry, at the 2008 Polar Bear Swim at La Jolla Shores.

never had chest pain, and generally felt good enough to swim, work, and experience the anguish of the 2008 Chargers season.

There is a wealth of information available on the web regarding coronary issues, and here locally, the Sharp Hospital web site is extremely helpful, in addition to providing assistance for physician referrals.

If that is too much trouble, then take the easier path and talk to Cindy Walsh. Besides being one of the best Cove swimmers, she is also a nurse and manager of cardiovascular services at Sharp, where she has been the last 23 years. When I spoke with her at Sharp, post-operation, she listened to my explanation of what I thought was going on with me, which she then summarized in a word: "denial". She was right. My misplaced diagnosis of my symptoms would not even consider heart disease, because my analysis began and ended with my belief that heart disease was something that happens to other people.

Testing is easily done, and is simple and inexpensive. Caught early, the treatment can involve nonsurgical changes of diet and the like. Not caught at all, the end result can be probate and employment for several attorneys.

If you are like me, these are the articles that I never read, since I was always in good shape. But, as it turns out, that was not enough. Now I am beginning to take stock of my old ways of thinking, and perhaps there is more to my lack of insight than I thought: after all, I did predict that the dot.com bust was only a temporary set back, that the Padres would go undefeated this season, and that the Dow would never dip below 10,000. It is enough to make me want to consider trading in my Yugo.