

Sleep Apnea Awareness Day – CPAP was not the answer for me
by Bob McKinney

I was diagnosed with sleep apnea after a home study through my chemist. I saw the sleep specialist and the first thing he said was “right you won’t be able to drive and you will have to use a CPAP machine”. I know these doctors are not delivering news about a terminal illness but geez that’s a pretty big blow. Some compassion wouldn’t have gone astray. Then I tried to talk about what else I could do to help my situation. What if I lose some weight? “NO there is no cure for sleep apnea. You MUST use a CPAP machine”. I didn’t ask if it would cure it, I wanted to know if it would help. I asked if there was any other treatment available, other than the CPAP machine. “NO you must use a CPAP machine”. So off I went to the chemist where I got to trial a machine for 2 weeks.

If the doctor thought I had poor sleep before nothing could have been worse than the sleep I had during those 2 weeks! I went back to the sleep specialist and got more of the same “you MUST use a CPAP”. He sold me a story about how it takes more than 2 weeks to get used to the mask and the machine etc and that once I do my life will be so much better blah blah. Then he added the threat – if I don’t use the CPAP machine I would lose my license. I need to drive to work. I also needed to drive my kids to sport and stuff. I couldn’t be without a licence. So I forked out just over \$2500 (money I couldn’t really afford) on a machine and some ‘spare’ accessories I was told I would need. I was determined to feel better and I was promised this was the answer so I felt really positive. But 6 months later and I felt worse. I really feel bad. My GP said I was feeling the effects of sleep deprivation. My wife said I spent the whole night wrestling with the mask. I bought 2 different masks hoping they would make a difference, they didn’t. My GP wasn’t helpful. He knew I was sleep deprived but he kept playing the same broken record the sleep specialist played “you MUST use a CPAP”.

I couldn’t live like this. It had been a year since I was diagnosed with sleep apnea and I was now sleeping less than I ever had. I was tired and grumpy all the time. It was affecting my marriage as well as my health. So I went and spoke to the chemist again. There was a lady in there that helps people loose weigh and she suggested that it might help me. It made sense. I was about 30kgs overweight. I always wondered if my weigh had anything to do with the sleep apnea. I didn’t even snore until I started to put on some serious weigh after I had an accident at work and hurt my knee. It was hard at first because I needed to exercise and I hadn’t done that in years. I joined a gym for the first time in my life and with the help of the lady in the chemist I lost 11kgs in the first 3 months. I was feeling great so I decided to see the sleep specialist again and ask for another sleep study – without the CPAP machine. He said no there was no point. So I went to my GP and told him that I would pay for the test if I had to. I got my way. By the time I had the sleep study I had lost 18kgs in total. The results came back and showed I had gone from severe sleep apnea to the upper end of mild.

It’s been nearly 4 years since that sleep specialist told me I MUST use a CPAP machine. I don’t use a CPAP machine. I lost another 6 kgs and found another sleep specialist. I did another sleep study and he noticed that I only have sleep apnea

when I sleep on my back (and that I had gone down from 14 to 8 apneas an hour) so I'm training myself to sleep on my side, they call it positional therapy. I no longer snore. I no longer feel like I have been hit by a truck in the morning and I no longer fall asleep multiple times a day. And my wife couldn't be happier!

I've spent a lot of money believing I MUST use a CPAP machine when some simple common sense would have helped. Losing weight did not cure my sleep apnea but then I never thought it would. But it stands to reason that if you are not carrying around a tonne of excess weight, you're going to feel better whether it improves your sleep apnea or not. For me it did improve my sleep apnea *and* my health... and to think I didn't even need to see a sleep specialist to work that out.

