

There's nothing like a soak in a long, hot bath



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The complete collection of these and other articles is now available in a book 'The Oblique View'. Further details can be obtained from Nikki@tfmpublishing.com or www.amazon.co.uk

We continue our series in which Consultant Interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab...and beyond. In this column, he considers spas.

I have been pondering about writing on this topic for some years. My hesitation to do so was largely the result of an anxiety to distance myself from any suggestion of advertising. However, the spell of impressively cold weather during the run up to last Christmas has prompted me to put aside such sensitivities and produce a column or two on one of my 'Top Ten Essentials for Modern Day Living'.

The question, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" has prompted countless well-rehearsed responses; long straight roads, the introduction of Latin and sewerage, are just a few examples. However, in addition to other notable ancient civilisations, they are particularly remembered for their enthusiasm for utilising mineral baths, dipping into hot springs and for generally enjoying the many benefits of communal bathing.

Health benefits

The health outcomes of such a practice are well described. From a cardiological perspective these include reduced stress and blood pressure, as well as enhanced exercise performance in the presence of left ventricular dysfunction. Whether or not your jobbing Maximus, Claudius or Octavius (or "*tuis hominis Romanis averagis*" as they were known) was actually plagued with such twenty-first century ailments is dubious, but just as with most other areas in which our Italian forebears dabbled, they undoubtedly had the right idea.

Years ago, and in conversation with a long-standing friend and colleague around a completely unrelated subject, we just happened to get onto the topic of hot tubs and he extolled their virtues. I don't know how we actually got on to that specific issue, but suffice it to say I was sold on the idea and have never looked back. Hence, while living in East Yorkshire we acquired our first version in the mid-to-late nineties, and *mark two* accompanied our move to Staffordshire eight years' ago.

Location

"Where do you put it?" is the most frequently posed question. There is only one answer: outside in the garden and exposed to the elements. Lying or sitting up to mid-chest in warm (40°C) water, while gazing up into the starlit sky of a chill winter's evening is a sensation that is difficult to beat. And, if ice and snow surrounds you and the ambient temperature is excessively sub-zero, then I would challenge anyone to better that.

There may be some practical issues to surmount, of course. It needs to be sited on a firm base and have its electrical supply provided by a cable that is sufficiently armoured so as not to be penetrated when an unknowing gardener starts prodding about in the flowerbeds with a fork. Also, be sure there is enough space down the side of the house to deliver the thing; otherwise we are talking about an industrial hoist and lifting it over the house into the back garden (and I kid you not).

Exactly where it goes will depend on its proximity to the house and the need to avoid any overhanging trees bearing fruit, thorns or prickly leaves. It is also important not to be overlooked by neighbours, who might not have such a liberal approach to communal bathing *au naturelle*, as it were. Of course, bathing attire can be donned, but you need to be sure that any detergents used to wash such garments are well rinsed and not retained, otherwise the effect is like using washing-up liquid in a dish washer (yes, I've done that and was clearing the kitchen of soapy bubbles for weeks). And, if you misjudged the overhanging tree tip, a stab vest might also be useful.

As for size, that is likely to reflect its anticipated occupancy. It is pleasantly surprising just how easy social interaction can become when one is adjacent to other human beings in a hot bath. Indeed, one of the selling points of the technology is the enhanced degree to which friends and families can become closer and communicate in a far more relaxed manner when lolling about in the tub. Hence, I would suggest at least a six-seater, if not more, in order to keep all options open.

Uses

What exactly do you do in it? Even if there is sufficient illumination, reading a newspaper is hard work as you have to keep it above water level, which can be tiring. A paperback might be easier, and certainly preferable to reading a book in a sauna, which is far hotter; I have tried that and after five minutes the glue melted and pages started falling out. But, if you wish, aquatic enjoyment can be further enhanced with additional optional gismos such as multiple water jets, bubbles, coloured underwater lights, various perfumes and fragrances, an integral fridge/icebox/mini-bar or – *get this* – a pop-up DVD/TV screen.

Personally, a glass of Chardonnay (red wine is not a good idea as it tends to get colder as

absolute zero beckons) and the refrains of Radio Five-Live's "606" Football Phone-In, is more than enough for me. Throw in (not literally, of course) *The Times* and a small cigar (did I say that?), and I am more than happy – and also able to keep my eye on my daughter Ellie as well, bobbing about as she does between her pink water wings.

Upkeep

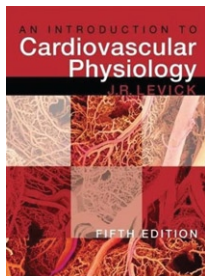
Maintenance? Well ... yes, of course, but less than you might think. The insulated cover reduces heat loss to a minimum so as to ensure a constant water temperature. In the 'hot summer months' (or that Sunday in late July, as we call it), we drop it down to 20°C, or so, in order to provide the odd cooling dip. Some slow-release bromine tablets every

few weeks, the odd chemical check (with test strips) and adjustment of the alkalinity/acidity, is about all the effort required. The filters might need rinsing every few months depending on usage, but I haven't changed the water in our tub for ... well, don't ask. Certainly, we haven't yet come down with malaria, leptospirosis or legionnaires' disease.

So, to conclude: a spa bath is undoubtedly worth the investment. The pay off is interpersonal harmony and utter relaxation, not to mention somewhere warm and cosy where you can be totally undisturbed – *usually*. However, unfortunately, not tonight. I will sign off now as Ellie is splashing water onto my keyboard and the screen of my laptop is steaming up ●

BOOK REVIEW

Book review



An introduction to cardiovascular physiology, 5th edition

Author: Levick, J Rodney
Publisher: Hodder Education,
 London, 2009
ISBN: 0340942045
Price: £29.99

This book attempts to "provide a comprehensive but accessible account of cardiovascular physiology". Pitched squarely at the medical student, it carries glowing reviews on www.amazon.co.uk but being text heavy with relatively small diagrams and a near complete lack of slides or photos, I put it to one side for a couple of days feeling I

needed to dedicate some time to get the most out of it.

On an afternoon free of lectures and other distractions, I looked at chapters 2-4 on the electrical properties of the heart and arrhythmias, an area where I've struggled before. J Rodney Levick does an excellent job of gently and logically taking you through the physiology. The text is succinct, detailed, clear, without being patronising, and flowed well. Any questions raised while making notes were answered in subsequent sections. There is excellent use of splitting the ample text into multiple headings making this an easy text to duck in and out of when going back for something specific.

Even though this book isn't marketed as an integrated clinical textbook, I was surprised and impressed by whole sections dedicated to pathological situations, such as systemic hypoxaemia and hypertension. The section on heart failure is especially good where the treatment is expertly related to the physiological principles and fills the gap sometimes found between academic and clinical texts.

Problem-based learning is included described by Levick as having serious drawbacks as well

as advantages. There are five well-written cases for students to apply their knowledge – the accompanying questions are challenging and definitely worth attempting.

Where the text goes above and beyond what is needed, I feel that the diagrams don't bolster it. Drawn all in the same colour scheme as the text (black and red) with no colour, I feel that they don't stand out from the writing or highlight and illustrate the important information.

Overall I feel that *An introduction to cardiovascular physiology* tackles the subject well with the text being the driving force behind the book. While not being an essential textbook every student should have, it is definitely tempting to any student interested in the area and worth hunting down in the library for your cardiovascular module.



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