



Michael Gelb, D.D.S., discusses sleep apnea and snoring at the Wilmette home of Steve and Nancy Rothstein on Feb. 24. (Allen Kaleta/For Pioneer Press)

Meet 'The Silencer'

Device could mean the last gasp for sleep apnea sufferers

By Stephanie Fosnight
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The doorbell rang. "It's more snorers," Steven Rothstein announced gleefully over the party chatter, hurrying to the front door. Rothstein wasn't out to mock the guests at the "snoring party" he and his wife Nancy hosted in their Wilmette home last month. Rather, the Rothsteins wanted to help other couples who've been stuck too long with the unwelcome bedfellow of snoring.

Four years ago, Steven Rothstein was a loud snorer who'd been diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea, a disorder in which the sleeping person repeatedly stops breathing long enough to decrease the amount of oxygen in the blood and brain and to increase the amount of carbon dioxide. It's a dangerous disorder that literally left him gasping for breath every night. After traveling around the country searching for the best treatment for his sleep apnea, Rothstein happened upon Michael Gelb, D.D.S., one of the dentists at the Gelb Center for Craniofacial Pain, Sleep Disorders, and Comprehensive Dentistry in New York City.

Dr. Gelb fitted Rothstein with a dental appliance similar to a mouthguard, which holds his jaw forward and his airway open at night, eliminating Rothstein's snoring and significantly reducing his sleep apnea. The appliance also gives Steven and Nancy Rothstein a restful night's sleep. "It's really hard on families," Nancy Rothstein said. "It's harder on the sleeping partners. It was hell for two years."

So when Gelb traveled to Chicago for a conference this February, the Rothsteins invited him to their home to talk about snoring and sleep apnea. Billing the event a "snoring party," they invited friends and family to hear Gelb talk about the treatment that changed their lives. About a dozen guests perched on living room couches, folding chairs, and the piano bench. They listened to Gelb discuss sleep apnea and snoring, different dental appliances, and even how sleep apnea contributed to the early death of NFL star Reggie White. "Every time you snore at night because of sleep apnea, you go from stage three sleep to stage two," Gelb said, standing in front of a coffee table laden with fruit and cookies. "Sleep has a huge effect on our health. In terms of cardiac disease, in terms of our memory, in terms of so many things in our bodies, sleep is right up there."

Since snoring is the sound of obstructed breathing, it is often a sign of sleep apnea, although not all snorers have sleep apnea. More than 12 million Americans suffer from sleep apnea, and adults who are overweight, have high blood pressure and especially thick necks are more prone to sleep apnea, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. "At night when we go to sleep, all the muscles relax," Gelb told the snorers. "If you pull the jaw forward, you create an airway. What am I doing with my bite plates? I'm keeping the jaw forward." Sticking out his tongue and leaning his head back while still standing up, Gelb demonstrated for the guests how a person's airway can become restricted during sleep. He relaxed his throat and let his tongue fall back against his soft palate.

Then, mimicking the sound of a patient trying to breathe, Gelb let out a loud, jarring, choked-sounding snort, making a few people jump while others chuckled. "Meanwhile," he continued, "the wife's thinking, 'Is he breathing? Is he not breathing? How much insurance do we have?'"

A person with sleep apnea will typically stop breathing for short pauses of 10 to 20 seconds, and then start breathing again with a gasping noise. This can occur more than 30 times an hour, severely limiting the quality of sleep and oxygen flow through the blood. Untreated sleep apnea can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and accidents caused by sleep deprivation.

"When I stop breathing, the oxygen level in my blood can go down to 80 percent or 75 percent," Gelb said. Gelb has invented four dental appliances to treat snoring and sleep apnea. His appliances and others are available through dentists belonging to the Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine.

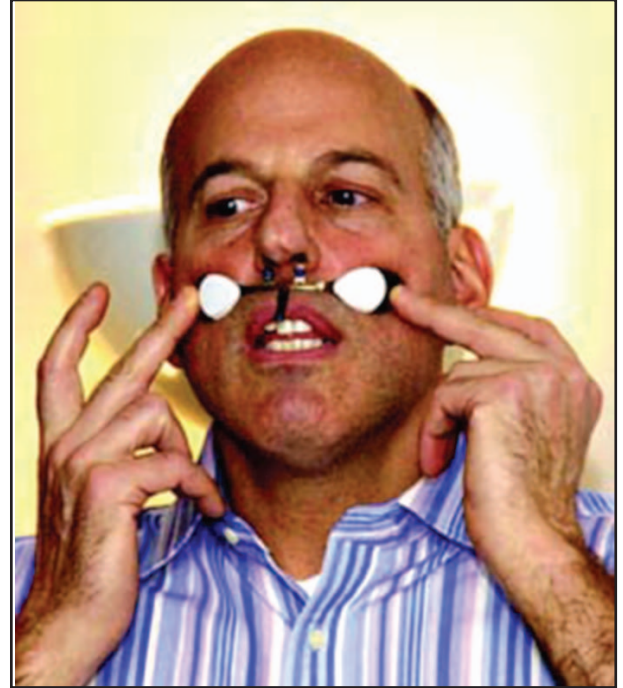
Another common treatment for sleep apnea is the Continuous Positive Airway Pressure machine, or CPAP. The patient puts a mask over his or her nose at night that forces oxygen through the throat and keeps the airway open. However, the machine is cumbersome, difficult to get used to, and can keep the bed partner awake.

Four studies reviewed by the Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine compared treating sleep apnea with dental appliances versus CPAP. The studies found that the appliances often, but not always, eliminated or severely reduced the apnea, while CPAP always eliminated it. However, all participants preferred using the appliance over CPAP. Steven Rothstein never got used to CPAP, and even considered throat surgery, which the surgeon told him had a 50 percent chance of working. After he discovered Dr. Gelb and got his custom fitted mouthpiece (appropriately named "The Silencer") Rothstein was elated.

"I got used to it right away," he told his friends. "It's a great invention. I use it every night." A couple of years ago, Rothstein told fellow snorer Harry Major, also of Wilmette, of his discovery and Major flew to New York and got his own device. "It's worked tremendously," Major said. He remembered when he had first started snoring. "For years I was a great sleeper, but I stopped sleeping (well). I had terrible dreams." Major and Rothstein are also glad that their wives no longer suffer from their snoring. They tell horror stories of hotel rooms where the wives slept in the closet or the bathtub. "We've been in the main bedroom," Major said. "This is a wonderful thing," Rothstein agreed. Nancy Rothstein used to change rooms so her husband could get as much sleep as possible. One sleepy day eight years ago, she was at her daughter's kindergarten when she had an idea. She sat down and wrote a children's book called "My Daddy Snores" on a piece of construction paper. Rothstein recently pulled out the manuscript, added a resource section about snoring and sleep apnea, and is looking for a publisher.

"My mommy used to play musical chairs with her friends when she was little. Now she plays musical beds with her family," Rothstein said, quoting from her book. Nancy Rothstein is also glad they caught her husband's sleep apnea before serious health problems developed. "Anybody here who has really bad snoring, check if it's apnea or not, because it's really dangerous," she told her guests. Gelb said people who are concerned about snoring should see a sleep dentist or a physician who will arrange a sleep study. "If they have excessive daytime sleepiness and they have heart disease, then they should go to a sleep center," he said. "If they only snore and have no high blood pressure or heart disease, they can probably go right to a sleep dentist." As the party drew to a close, Nancy Rothstein pressed refreshments on the guests and thanked them for coming. "Up to half an hour ago, I was thinking of who else I should have invited," she confided. "Who can I help? We need to do this again. We could have an auditorium full."

Learn about sleep disorders at sleepeducation.com or find a sleep dentist at www.dentalsleepmed.org.



Dr. Gelb demonstrates a new diagnostic sleep strip developed by Perez Levie of Israel. The device comes equipped with a computer chip that can record a patient's sleep schedule for up to eight hours. The strip can be prescribed by physicians. (Allen Kaleta/For Pioneer Press)

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