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A little gadget with the strength to end a surfer's blues

Those with chronic back pain are right to be cynical about miracle cures but the invention of a Cornish engineer may be the real thing, says fellow sufferer Ben Hunt

Early Wednesday morning last week I picked up a shampoo bottle from the floor of the shower without having to bend my knees; 10 minutes later I put on both my socks and shoes while standing.

Now I dare say the majority of readers manage these feats every day without so much as a passing thought. But for me a small rush of elation accompanied each as it was the first time in more than 10 years that I have been able to perform such tasks without stabbing pains in the small of my back and down my left leg.

I have lived with back pain since a moment of youthful foolishness on a Hawaiian surfing beach in 1990 left me with a slipped lumbar disc, which has degenerated steadily and irreversibly since, spreading misery and mayhem on the way.

Like all sufferers of chronic back pain I have come to understand one eternal truth: with a bad back you can never be comfortable. It nags away day and night provoking symptoms that run from minor irritation through to raging, indescribable pain.

It is also very restrictive. I have not been able to carry either of my children as much as I would have liked and have had to abandon rugby and bowling regularly in cricket, admittedly at no great cost to the sporting world.

On the plus side, however, I have been excused heavy lifting since I was 18, which is unfortunate for Jane, my

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wife, who has had to heave heavy boxes all over three houses through two moves whenever she has found a moment to put the children down.

I have also become well acquainted with great swathes of the medical establishment.

Like Tony Blair, I have had anti-inflammatory injections. I have had two bouts

of surgery, plenty of spinal manipulation, enough drugs to open a surgery and if they gave out air miles for physiotherapy I could fly first class around the world once a week for the rest of my life.

I stopped believing there was a solution to my problem about five years ago and that my only option was to put the brakes on the deterioration I know will come with age.

Certainly I did not expect to find an answer in the hands of a Cornish energy exploration engineer in a suite in London's Dorchester Hotel while looking into the story of a New York-based investment vehicle raising funds.

The investment group, Sky Capital Enterprises, had set up shop in the Dorchester to showcase Advanced Spinal Technologies, one of its leading investments, which it hopes will bring back pain relief to the masses through the ingenious invention of Robert Taylor, the aforementioned Cornishman.

Now if 15 years of back pain teaches you anything it is a healthy dose of scepticism about new treatments,

and the hard sell approach of the Americans promoting their company did little to stifle this reflex.

"This will change people's lives," said Ross Mandell, president and chief executive of Sky.

Yada, yada, yada. Heard it all before. Acupuncture. It will change your life! The Sleeppeezee miracle mattress. It will change your life! Tosh. Mucking about in the surf on the north shore of Oahu. That will change your life.

The only arrow that made it through my chain mail of

cynicism was the fact that Mandell had already put his money where his mouth was, investing in Taylor's machine after it had given him instant relief from a chronic condition.

And so, why not give it a go? I was pretty sure it couldn't do any harm so at the very worst I was going to get a free massage.

Taylor explained patiently, with the help of a model spine, how pain occurs and how most problems (about 97 per cent) can be improved by working greater mobility in the verte-

brae. All of which sounded simple enough and, as far I am aware, is pretty much the received medical wisdom.

The tricky bit is doing it. Therapists have to use their hands but too often they lack both the strength and the stamina to work on bones that are well protected and not given to easy movement.

Responding to the calls of spinally challenged friends, Taylor decided a mechanical device was needed and after years of research and development came up with the Technology-Assisted Spinal Mobilisation Unit.

What this machine lacks in a catchy name it makes up for in functionality. The business end is a mechanical hand about the size of a computer mouse that has four motorised pads that work on three different settings. The "spasm" mode relaxes the muscle and prepares the back before the "reflex" mode stimulates muscle reflexes along the spine in advance of the crucial "mobilisation" phase.

Company bumf describes this as the application of force through the pistons that "push against the trans-

verse processes of adjacent vertebrae producing counter-rotational movement". What this actually means is anybody's guess but in the hands of a skilled practitioner such as Taylor it effectively returns mobility to stiff and long unused joints.

For a pleasant hour I lay on Taylor's table as he worked at my spine expounding his theories on back pain and treatment until he told me he was done.

I don't quite know what I expected when I got up. But once the dizziness had subsided I realised I felt no pain in my leg and no weakness in my lower back.

Taking my leave I headed out to Park Lane and immediately realised that my stride had lengthened, that the dull ache I usually feel in my left foot had gone and I just felt altogether easier.

But the real test was a night's sleep. I haven't woken up without some degree of pain and stiffness for 10 years. Until last Wednesday morning, and for the four days that followed. And I can't stop smiling about it.

I had a further treatment

with Taylor two days later and am now in the hands of an osteopath who has one of the few machines known to be working in the UK to complete the recommended course of five treatments.

On Taylor's advice I am also working on my fitness and on losing weight (although two miracles in the same month might be a little too much to expect).

For back sufferers the world over I have good and bad news. The good news is that this treatment seems to work. I appreciate that it is early days but I feel 100 per cent better and my scepticism has disappeared with the back pain.

Unfortunately, the availability of treatment is limited. AST is awaiting the Food and Drug Administration's approval for the treatment in the US and is exploring methods of making Taylor's machines available elsewhere, including the UK.

But if you can find a machine, try it. It might just change your life.



Spine-tingling: Ben Hunt on a visit to Harley Street

Daniel Lynch