

Therapy time



Asthma sufferer **Joe McNamee**, and others with breathing issues, enjoy a breath of fresh air after a novel therapy inspired by a Polish salt mine

Well worth its salt

EVEN today, a miner's job is a pretty grim one and dangerous — just ask the 33 Chileans trapped deep underground in the San José mine. While hazards such as cave-ins and toxic gases are a real and constant threat, a whole range of pulmonary and respiratory diseases are even more likely afflictions.

Now picture Europe in the 1800s when health and safety measures barely stretched beyond the canary in a cage as an early biosensor. Polish doctor Felix Boczkowski was used to treating the gamut of mining-related illnesses — from the constant irritated and running noses right up to asthma, emphysema and silicosis. Yet the salt miners of Krakow were in pretty rude health all round, rarely suffering from serious respiratory illnesses or even hayfever or coughs.

Boczkowski concluded this was down to the dry salt particles in the air which the miners breathed in all day and, in 1843, published his first scientific observations of the phenomenon, laying the foundation for the modern treatment practice of salt therapy.

The Wieliczka mine where Boczkowski first made his observations is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Ireland's first 'salt cave' is in a retail unit in Glenroyal Shopping Centre in Maynooth. Dr Tamas Bakonyi GP, owner-operator along with his entrepreneur wife, Orsi Sarkozy, holds little truck with the artifice that is attached to so many salt caves or chambers around the world.

"Some places have been designed to look like mines with big piles of salt and salt crystals but this has little or no benefit," says Bakonyi. For him, it is all about delivering the most efficacious treatment possible to the patient: an insulated chamber with a high-tech air purification system filtering out much of the impurities, allergens and germs we normally breathe in. Temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure stability as a specifically designed computer-controlled machine pumps pure pharmaceutical grade salt into the room's atmosphere in particles of 5 microns or less. Bakonyi flicks on an ultra-violet light in the chamber and we can see the little motes of salt 'dust' twinkling in the air.

All the patient has to do is sit back in one of the comfortable loungers and relax in the softly-lit room, maybe listen to a little music, read a book or nod off during a one hour session. There are even toys for some of the younger patients.

"An allergic reaction — the cause of asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis etc — is basically the immune system over-reacting," explains Bakonyi. "The tissue becomes inflamed and full of mucus. The salt draws out the liquid mucus."

A session in the salt cave normalises the chest's immuno-regulation. What the salt cave is doing is teaching the immune system not to overreact to harmless allergens," he explains. "And after about 20 sessions, children with asthma will have more comfort, control and a better quality of life for nine to 12 months," he explains.

Bakonyi, who practices as a GP in Kildare,



believes Irish doctors over-prescribe medications, particularly for viral infections. Nor does he think it is especially the fault of the doctors but rather patients who don't believe they are being properly treated unless they walk out of the surgery with some form of prescription.

"When you take an inhaler, you take two puffs and try to hold it in. However, the average breath takes in about half a litre of air

whereas the lungs have an average capacity of between four and six litres so your steroid inhalers will never reach all the parts of the lung. When you breathe back out, you breathe out most of the inhaled steroid. And if you take more than the prescribed inhalations of the inhaler, there are side-effects," he says, fluttering his hand over his heart, miming palpitations.

In fact, an adult's lungs have a total surface

area if unfolded of about 70m² — roughly the same size as half a tennis court. During an hour in the salt cave you will breathe approximately 1,000 times, bringing the healing salt particles to the deepest recesses of the lungs.

But isn't an excess of salt supposed to be bad for you — high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, all that sort of thing? The salt inhaled, explains Bakonyi, does not travel to the stomach and in turn the heart and kidneys and even if it did, the amount ingested is a fraction of the recommended 6gm daily.

Bakonyi is a highly pragmatic practitioner whom one suspects only eats his cornflakes in the morning because there is empirical scientific evidence to back up his actions.

Certainly he is deeply scornful of alternative therapies which do not have scientific corroboration, and has amassed a plethora of research papers to back up the claims of salt therapy.

However, the proof of the pudding is surely in the eating — or in this case, the breathing.

I come from a family who appear to have cornered the market in respiratory ailments: I suffer from hayfever, all-year round sinus issues and take the strongest steroid inhaler on the market for asthma.

My brother's asthma is far worse than mine, chronic since childhood. Of a similar scientific bent to Bakonyi, he has even measured his tidal volume — the volume of air moved in an out of the lungs during a breath — and spends the duration of our session engaging Bakonyi in the mechanics of the whole operation. Which is one way of ensuring a steady flow of salt particles into the lungs, I suppose.

I, on the other hand, am a believer in human testimony and talk to a few of the other clients. Ann, 34, from Maynooth is there with her son, Olan, nine, who is asthmatic. She is unsure of the science and admits staying in the room for an hour at a time bores Olan senseless despite the toys. But he is back for a second course. He did it last year and his symptoms were alleviated dramatically.

Margaret has brought her granddaughter, Rhona, aged eight, who had a recurring cough. This is their last visit and the cough is gone. "I don't care how it works," says Margaret, "but it does."

Paul, 35, on his first visit, speaks in short bursts with nasally tones, so typical of chronic asthmatics and sinusitis sufferers. "I'm willing to give anything a try," he wheezes cheerfully, before returning to his book.

At the end of our session, the brother has noticed no difference in his condition but acknowledges the multiple-session rule for asthmatics. I, on the other hand, am experiencing a very strange sensation in my nose which turns out to be the rather novel sensation, for me, of breathing fresh air through clean, dry nasal passages. I won't make any claims for the salt cave on the basis of one session. But nearly three months on, my nose remains relatively clear, which means no annoying post-nasal drip leading to the inevitable chest infection. I shall certainly be returning. Pass the salt, please.

■ For details phone 01-628 9851 or visit www.saltcave.ie.