

## Blowhole jumping

Human beings seem to have a supreme talent at finding ways to hurt themselves. A recent report in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (1994; 161: 725–26) adds blowhole jumping to the list. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a blowhole as, among other things, a whale's nostril. Captain Ahab may have been a blowhole jumper, although Melville did not record it. The modern blowhole jumpers avoid whales, instead using a feature of the eastern coast of Australia.

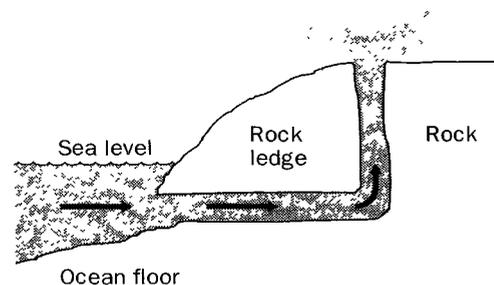
Scattered up and down the coast are peculiar formations that have developed where rock ledges overhang the sea. Over the ages, the waves' actions under the ledge have moulded a channel which, after a distance, turns towards the sky. In time, the vertical channel becomes a hole in the rock, a naturally created escape route for the power of the ocean (see figure).

Crowds gather to watch the water rising and falling at the bottom of the hole, then see the stronger waves burst up the hole,

spouting water 20 or 30 m into the sky. The foolhardy, drawn by the hypnotic sound of the sea's cycle, and by the unpredictability of the blows, jump in.

Most blowhole jumpers wait until the water rises towards the top of the hole, then jump. Some are on small boards. Jumpers are sucked down into the hole then spat out (they hope) through the channel. Others dive into the hole when the water is at its nadir and swim out through the channel and find their way back to the rocks.

Like base-jumping (leaping off tall buildings with a parachute or hang-glider) and bungee-jumping (diving off cliffs or bridges with elastic tied to the ankles), blowhole jumping is an unofficial, legally dubious, intensely individualistic pursuit of an adrenaline rush. Part of the rush comes from the knowledge that death or serious injury is no further away than a change in the weather conditions. In base-jumping the wind is an everpresent danger. In blowhole jumping, it is that one big wave.



Formation of blowhole

Petchell and Ryan have recorded the cases of two young women—aged 16 and 24—who jumped into a blowhole at Warriewood in northern Sydney and sustained stable fractures of their thoracolumbar spines without neurological damage. Their warning, that jumping less than 15 m into water can sometimes cause injury, is apt. But, somehow, their report has missed the thrill of it all.

Mark Ragg

## Dr Elders' return to Arkansas

Former US Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders has returned to the University of Arkansas Medical School as professor of paediatrics, but not without some notice and controversy. Citing differences with her opinions on drug abuse, condom distribution in schools, and sex education, conservatives in the Arkansas legislature threatened to withhold public monies from the medical school unless her reappointment was revoked.

Dr Elders has been a tenured professor at UAMS since 1971, and was expected to return there after President Clinton dismissed her from the Surgeon General's post last month (see *Lancet* 1994; 344: 1695).

During testimony last week before the Joint Budget Committee of the legislature, Elders received support from UAMS Chancellor Henry Ward. Dr Ward called the former Surgeon General a "very effective teacher", and noted that the rules of academic tenure ensured her place at the medical school. Moreover, he argued, since her professorship remained unfilled during her fifteen months in Washington, DC, no additional position would need to be created—or funded—to accommodate her.

Despite continued protests from conservatives, budget committee members voted unanimously to recommend the UAMS appropriations to the full legislature—Elders included.

David H Frankel

## Rhabdomyolysis with lithotomy position

Lying on one's back might not be innocuous activity—at least not if the exaggerated lithotomy position is adopted for long enough, according to a study of patients undergoing urethroplasty (Scott A, et al, *J Urol* 1994; 152: 1970–72). The study was prompted by a case of acute renal failure apparently secondary to rhabdomyolysis in a patient who had undergone repair of urethral stricture, an operation that does not involve extensive muscle dissection but takes several hours.

In the study of 10 patients undergoing

elective urethroplasty in the lithotomy position (with bean bag for buttocks support, foam rubber for all areas of potential pressure, and gel pad under the back), all had increased creatine kinase postoperatively, which returned to normal within 7 days. Peak concentrations ranged from 321 to 38703 units/L and correlated with duration of operation (which ranged from 4.5 to 8 h). One patient (whose maximum creatine kinase concentration was only 552 units/L) had myoglobinuria that cleared the next day. Care had been taken not to give any drugs intramuscularly.

Vivien Choo

## News in brief

**Plague** India has been declared plague free (*Weekly Epidemiol Rec* 1995; 70: 4). No new cases have been notified to WHO since Oct 26 and no domestic rodents have been found positive for 2 months.

**Study of NHS prescribing** The UK Department of Health has earmarked £2.4 million, to be made available over 4 years, for research into prescribing.

**Cat scratch disease encephalitis** In August and September, 1994, five cases of encephalitis associated with lymphadenopathy and raised titres of antibody to *Bartonella* (formerly *Rochalimaea*) *henselae* (range 1:512 to 1:2048) were reported in Broward and Palm Beach Counties, Florida (*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Rep* 1994; 43: 909–16). Encephalitis complicates 1–7% cases of cat scratch disease (CSD). There has been no evidence of a back-

ground epidemic of classic CSD in Florida or of the presence of a more virulent form of *B. henselae*, and further investigations are being conducted.

### Susceptibility to rheumatoid arthritis

The Hôpital Lariboisière (Paris) is coordinating a national campaign to recruit 200 families with two siblings affected by rheumatoid arthritis (RA)—and preferably families in which the parents are still alive. The goal is to locate the main susceptibility genes in RA. The global budget for the first genome scan of the 200 families is FFr 3 million. To date, only one susceptibility locus in RA is known: HLA-DRB1, an HLA class II antigen.

### MRC schools liaison service

As part of its response to the government's science policy, the UK Medical Research Council has launched a service to update science teachers on medical research, starting with five *Research Updates*.