

I don't like to admit it when I'm stupid. I'm really not fond of making avoidable life-threatening mistakes. Old time divers are just like new divers in as much as we don't like to admit being wrong, but I have managed to get myself bent. I could keep my mouth shut and not let people know what happened to me, but nobody would learn from that except me. The pain I've been having for the last 2 weeks has already been teaching me what I don't want to do again, but that's getting ahead of my story.

I've got about 4 to 5 thousand dives over the last 36 years and I've never been known to hurt myself before now. This year I'm pushing 200 hours underwater and I'm in real good shape for an old fart. I've made lots of real deep dives this year, but that's not how I got bent. On the deep dives, I always pay close attention to my computers. I do the stops as required and come up slow enough to not get hurt. Where I got hurt was in shallow water. Most of my dives are in rivers looking for relics. This has been my hobby for 30 years. I usually dive in about 35 feet and have always believed I couldn't get decompression sickness at this depth. I use a metal detector and a suction dredge while diving so I don't exert myself and my air lasts way too long.

Two weeks ago, Erskine Mathis and I were diving. He made 3 dives and I made 4. The next day I had some pain in my right hip and all the way down to my toes. I thought I was starting to have poor circulation and that my arteries were clogging up from too much biscuits and gravy. The pain did not go away all week, so I decided that I would go see my doctor the next week if the pain didn't stop over the weekend. Of course, I went diving again over the weekend. This time Erskine and Spencer went with me. We each made 4 dives, but I used 4 big tanks and 2 80 cu. ft. tanks. My dives were longer than those by Spence or Erskine. When I dive in black water rivers the vis is only a few inches even with a real good light. I usually only check my air gauge and compass and never think about checking my computer while shallow water diving. On my third dive of the day, while pulling myself up the dredge hose, I decided to see what my Suunto Spyder computer said. I pulled back my wetsuit and glove and tried to read the display. I thought it was broke because it said 20 minutes ascent time. I didn't believe I could possibly have 20 minutes deco time before I could come up. I waited about three minutes at 10 feet then my air was too low. I decided the computer was wrong anyway so I came on up. I rigged up my fourth tank and went on my last dive of the day. By the way, I had already found a 40-cal. Glock pistol and some Civil War relics. I made my last dive then came up and told Spence my computer was broke. He said his had also gone into deco. This is when I finally figured out that my pain might be the result of getting the bends.

I looked at my computer and checked out the last eight dives which were the two days of diving for the past two weekends. On the current day I had stayed at 33-35 ft for a total of six hours underwater. My total time on the surface between dives was less than one hour for the whole day. My computer showed I had come up too fast on three dives and had been in deco by the third dive each day.

When I went to the dive store on Monday we printed out my dive profiles for the eight dives. I was amazed to see how badly I had screwed up. On the fourth dive of the first dive day, it showed I needed 58 minutes of ascent time. I did no safety stop or deco stop on this dive. This is the dive that hit me first. This showed when I went into deco on the graph and how fast I came up. These printouts were great. They stopped the denial and were really useful when I was admitted to the hospital.

I kept hoping the pain would just go away, but it didn't. I was actually starting to hurt more. I finally called up Dr. Ernest Campbell. Dr. Campbell owned Birmingham Surgical before he retired. Now he lives in Gulf Shores and is the Scuba Doc for Rodales Scuba Diver magazine. Dr. Campbell had told me before that some of my deep water profiles might get me hurt. Of course, I told him how smart I was and that I already knew everything. When I talked to him now, he did not say he told me so. I explained my dives to him and told him what my printouts showed. He told me that I might have permanent damage to my spine and that I needed to get in a recompression chamber as soon as possible. I also talked to Mike Edfeldt, a commercial diver, who comes in the Scuba School. He has been bent several times over the years and I wanted to know what he thought about my situation. He called Dr. Ross Saxon who is the President of the Commercial Diving Association and told him of my dive profiles and the pain I was feeling. Dr. Saxon also said I should go into a chamber ASAP. I finally bit the bullet and called my primary care doctor and asked him to get me an approval from my insurance company for me to go to Carraway Hospital. This was granted immediately and I went to Carraway.

Carraway Hospital has one of the finest hyperbaric medicine departments available anywhere. This department is headed up by Dr. Bobby Lewis who is also a scuba diver. There are also several other scuba divers on staff in this department. Dr. Lewis interviewed me before treatment to see if I needed to go into the chamber. When I showed him the eight printouts of my dive profiles, the question of whether I was suffering from DCS or not was answered. He told me that some commercial divers had been shallow water bent. He also said that the numbness in my toes for the past few years was probably the result of similar dives. I thought the numbness was caused by frostbite in Alaska. He also said that the headaches that Barry Hocutt gets after these types of dives could be DCS. Dr. Lewis said that some of my memory problems and getting words twisted could have been caused by my abusing these shallow water dives. Too much bottom time, not enough surface time between dives and, of course, coming up too fast with no stops can lead to DCS.

The technician who put me in the chamber is named Keith. He stayed with me the whole time, of course he was on the outside. The big chamber holds a dozen or so people and is used to treat a multitude of illnesses. They only treat 4 or 5 cases of the bends each year. The big chamber was already being used and was under pressure so I didn't go into it. I was put into a small acrylic tube type chamber. I don't feel comfortable with my arms confined or being anywhere that I can't get out of or move around. Spencer told them that I might have a problem with this and they offered me a tranquilizer. I was eager to get it. They pressurized me to 60 feet and I was on 100% oxygen. Every 20 minutes I would breath air for five minutes to prevent oxygen poisoning. I stayed at 60 feet about one hour and was then brought up to 30 feet. It took them another two-plus hours to get me back to surface pressure. The pain in my leg left me soon after reaching the 60' depth. Dr. Lewis told me that I was probably too late coming to the chamber to help with getting rid of the bubbles that caused the damage. The nitrogen bubbles were probably already gone and all they could do with the chamber was help relieve and start healing the damage that had been done. The pain stayed away for about twelve hours and was much less when it did return. I don't know how long it will be before I heal up and quit hurting. I will probably have some permanent damage. From now on I will always pay attention to and obey my dive computer. I'm going to be the guy who comes up real slow.

I am very impressed with the Suunto dive computers and the printouts that can come from them. Never again will I say these computers are too conservative. I think these instruments are the equivalent of the black boxes on airlines that show the profile of the flight. In case of a major accident and being unable to tell your dive profile, critical information could be retrieved from the diver's black box to find out what happened. The Suunto Spyder, Stinger and Mosquito computer watches are always on your arm and they are always on.

I want to thank all the people who advised me and helped me with this problem. I hope other divers learn and benefit from my mistake.

Attached are copies of the dive profiles from my Suunto computer. If you have trouble downloading them, let me know. We will be happy to mail you a copy or you can stop by the Scuba School to pick them up.

Sincerely,

Steve Phillips
Southern Skin Divers Supply