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Pursuing the radon remedy

BOULDER — Brad Erickson, 37, suffers from a disease similar to rheumatoid arthritis called ankylosing spondylitis or A.S.

The disease causes pain and inflammation of the joints, primarily those between the vertebrae of the spine.

"I've had it for about 10 years," Erickson said. "It pretty much got debilitating last year."

Erickson tried all the conventional treatments — mainly prescription drugs that aim only to decrease symptoms.

When drug after drug failed and there was nothing left to try, Erickson realized he needed to find something else.

He saw mention of radon mines on an online A.S. forum. He did some research, booked a plane ticket to Montana and made a reservation at the Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine in Boulder.

Erickson, who lives in Bow, N.H., and works as a ferrier, shoeing horses, came to the mine for the first time last summer.

"I came out here last year really crippled up," he said.

He stayed 10 days and by day five, noticed substantial improvement of his inflammation. After a week, he no longer needed to take an anti-inflammatory.

When he left, he felt about 75 percent better. Three months after his visit, he felt 90 percent better, similar to the way he felt in the early stages of the disease.

After about 10 1/2 months, the effects started wearing off, so Erickson booked another plane ticket. By the end of his 10-day stay earlier this month, he no longer had any symptoms, he said.

"The disease went into remission," he said.

A fluke discovery

The Boulder-Basin area south of Helena is the only place in the United States to find radon health mines.

The area is currently home to four mines.

Most of them were initially claimed in the 1920s as prospectors were looking for gold, silver and other metals. Later, after World War II, the mines were determined to contain radioactive materials.

The grandfather of Patricia Lewis, who now owns the Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine, started mining uranium there in the late 1940s.

A Los Angeles woman came to the Free Enterprise in 1951 to visit her husband who was an investor of the mine. After several visits, she noticed that her bursitis disappeared.

Word spread of the mine's healing effects, and it was flooded with visitors. In 1952 operators decided to stop production and turn the mine into the healing destination it has been ever since.

The Boulder-Basin area was once home to 16 radon health mines, Lewis said.

The science

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that's produced by uranium.

Visitors to the radon mine inhale the colorless, odorless, tasteless gas. They also ingest it by drinking water from the mine.

The radon mines can be used to treat autoimmune disorders because the radiation stimulates the body's immune system, Lewis said.

Radon is a stressing agent and helps the body in a way similar to how a vaccine, which is a small dose of poison, protects from disease, and how exercise builds muscle by stressing the muscles.

As the radon breaks down, it causes a biological process that stimulates your cells, said Carly Gilchrist, owner of the Sunshine Health Mine, located between Boulder and Basin.

While the health mines claim that radon has beneficial effects, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warns that radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States and claims about 20,000 lives annually. The EPA urges homeowners to have their homes tested and mitigated of the gas if needed.

Lewis sees the hundreds of millions spent on ridding basements of radon as wasted money.

Scientific bodies studied uranium miners in the 1940s and found they had a higher incidence of lung cancer, Lewis said. However those studies didn't account for miners who smoked or worked in coal mines.

Studies that have taken those factors into account haven't yielded the same results, she said.

In fact, many studies have proven radon's benefits. Lewis keeps a box full of copies of various reports on radon's health benefits.

Dr. Bryan Martin, medical oncologist at the Great Falls Clinic, says there are scientific reasons why low doses of radon can reduce inflammation and stimulate the immune system.

There was also a study done in Iowa that showed lung cancer risk is not increased by visiting radon mines, Martin said.

In Europe, radon mines are used commonly to treat medical problems.

Doctors prescribe it and insurance covers it, said Lewis who has visited mines in Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic.

"In Europe, the use of these mines is very different," Martin said. "They're much more accepted."

Inside the mine

Visitors to Montana's radon mines are encouraged to spend 32 hours in the mine, in two-hour increments, over 10 days or longer.

At the Sunshine, Mary Widow and Earth Angel mines, visitors walk through a horizontal tunnel carved into the hillside. Chairs and tables give the visitors a place to pass the time.

At the Free Enterprise Mine, visitors take an elevator 85 feet down to an old mine tunnel. Tables and chairs line the mine's walls along with a selection of magazines and games spread out on tables.

"You just come down here and sit," said Michael Kenowski, who's been coming to the Free Enterprise Mine for the past 15 years. "You play cards; you laugh; you play games."

Kenowski uses the mine to treat his arthritis, bursitis, tennis elbow and gout.

"I'm their poster child," he said with a laugh.

The floor of the Free Enterprise Mine, which once had tracks running down it, is now covered in plywood. Otherwise, the mine still looks pretty much like a mine.

As a reminder that you haven't stepped back in time, wireless Internet is available throughout the Free Enterprise.

Kelly Schomler, of Carnation, Wash., checked her e-mail and watched a movie on her laptop while she sat, wrapped in a blanket in the mine where the temperature hovers around 55 to 70 degrees.

Visitors at the Free Enterprise also can opt to sit in a surface-level room, with a row of comfy recliners, where air from the mine is pumped in.

Beneficial or harmful?

Air in the Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine has been tested to show radon levels that range from 700 to 2,200 picocuries per liter.

The EPA recommends that homes with radon levels of more than 4 pCi/L be mitigated.

The reason the lower level of radon in homes is a cancer risk, while the higher levels in the mine are safe, is because of the duration of exposure, Martin said.

People with radon in their homes are exposed to it day in and day out for decades, which can lead to lung cancer, he said.

Exactly where the cutoff is still unclear, Martin said.

He compared radon to wine. Doctors think one glass of red wine a day has health benefits, where six glasses a day has negative effects. That threshold for radon hasn't been determined.

Doctors use radiation to treat cancer, but it's a different type than is found in the mine, Martin said.

Radon produces an alpha radiation, which is absorbed only millimeters into the body. The X-ray radiation used to treat cancer goes through all body tissues. It can be blocked only by lead.

"Alpha radiation is actually the weakest form of radiation," Martin said.

Skeptics turned believers

When Kenowski first heard about the radon mines, he was skeptical.

His mother-in-law had been visiting the Free Enterprise Mine for years before Kenowski went. He used to make fun of her for thinking the mines had any benefit.

But as Kenowski experienced more pain from arthritis and other diseases, he decided to give it a try.

"You get to a point where you'll try anything," Kenowski said.

Now he's a true believer.

"I was told in '94 that I was going to have to have my hip replaced in a year or two," he said. "I just got it replaced last year."

"There was a time when I could hardly walk because my knees were so sore," Kenowski said. "Now my knees don't ever hurt."

Even after the results Erickson got on his first trip, he still had his doubts when he came back to the mine a second time. Maybe it was just a fluke that his disease improved after he visited the mine.

However, by the end of his second trip he knew that wasn't the case.

"I plan on making the annual pilgrimage," Erickson said.

Gilchrist, of the Sunshine Mine, doesn't try to convince people who think the radon will have negative effects.

The radon heals those best who have an open mind.

"People who come here have a great attitude," Gilchrist said. "They're tired of taking drugs. They've gone out of the box."

Most of the mine owners rely mainly on word-of-mouth advertising.

It's hard to believe the effects of the mine, if you don't see them first hand, she said.

Radon's role in healing

Lewis doesn't ever expect that radon mines in the United States will be regarded the way they are in Europe.

"It may become more accepted," she said.

More scientific studies recently have confirmed the mines' benefits.

"The science is looking up," she said.

The mines had their heyday in the mid-80s, she said.

At that time there were fewer prescription medications for arthritis and other diseases, joint replacements weren't as common and steroids weren't well understood.

Since then, the mine's business has bounced up and down.

She's worried over the years that pharmaceutical and joint replacement advances would put an end to the need for the mines.

"I thought for sure Celebrex would put us out of business," she said.

However, while drugs can have harsh side effects, about 80 percent of people who come to the mines tolerate it and respond to it.

Lewis doesn't believe the radon mines can replace modern medicine.

"We feel we're a compliment," she said. "If we can make a physician's job easier, that's great."

"We are a healing destination," Lewis said. "We are not a tourist trap."

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