

CHERYL HALL

Snore doctor helps patients sleep



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Doctor drifts into snoring

For millions of Americans, getting a good night's sleep is a pipe dream.

Craig Schwimmer is Dallas' Mr. Sandman.

The 46-year-old Dallas physician has transformed his traditional ear, nose and throat practice into the Snoring Center, which promises to fix snoring and sleep apnea in an office visit.

Creating silence is golden. With offices in Dallas and Fort Worth, the Snoring Center will bring in \$4.1 million in revenue this year, up 40 percent from 2007. And while other forms of elective nips and tucks, eye surgery and cosmetic dental work are showing signs of early aging, Dr. Schwimmer says his business will be better in 2009.

Why is Dr. Schwimmer's business still bustling? As a nation, we're getting older. As a state, we're getting fatter. As a metro area, we're very allergy-prone. And there's a growing awareness about the importance of sleep.

"The bed partner of a snorer loses on average one hour of sleep a night," Dr. Schwimmer says in his Snider Plaza office. "Over a 25-year marriage, that's like a year without sleep. Twenty percent of married couples routinely sleep apart because of snoring.

Continued from Page 1D

"That's why they call me Dr. Love."

The Pillar procedure stitches tiny implants into the soft palate of the roof of your mouth to silence your night thunder.

This year, Dr. Schwimmer has implanted 1,200 sets of these at an average cost of \$3,000 a set. He's shrunk hundreds of tonsils with the stroke of a laser and expanded nasal airways with radio frequency treatments. Those procedures typically cost \$1,500 to \$2,000.

It's all fee-for-service. Dealing with insurance is your problem, not his.

He has two groups of patients: those with sleep apnea, where breathing repeatedly stops during sleep, and simple snorers.

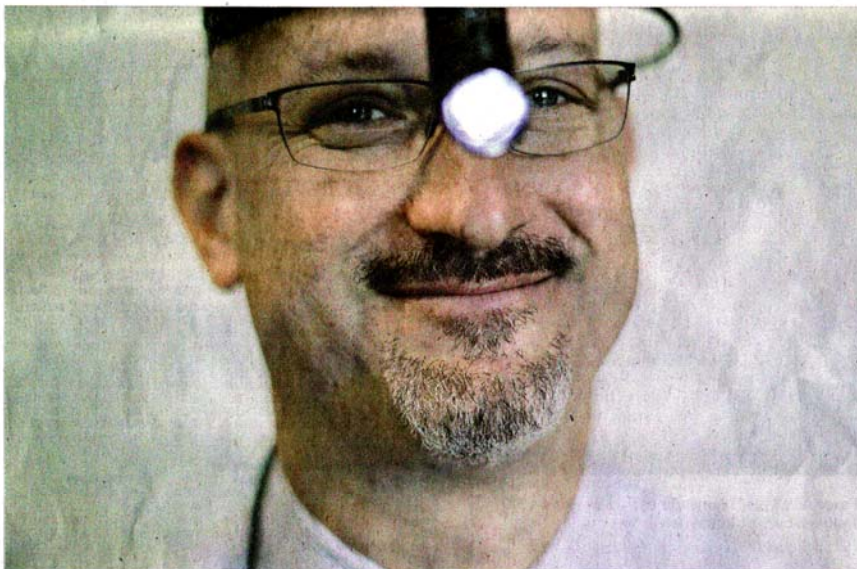
Darth Vader

The standard treatment for apnea is a breathing mask worn at night that pumps a continuous flow of air to keep airways open. It's effective, but it's like being Darth Vader — or sleeping with him. More than half of the people who've been equipped with the masks don't use them regularly, Dr. Schwimmer says.

Surgery requires an overnight hospital stay, followed by one to two weeks of recuperation and missed work, he says. His procedures are done in his offices, usually in less than an hour.

Dr. Schwimmer has been in ear, nose and throat medicine since his residency days in 1993 at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, a leading center in sleep-disorder breathing surgery.

He was on the faculty of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he met his wife, Shanon, an



Photos by G.J. MCCARTHY/Staff Photographer

Dr. Craig Schwimmer is working on plans to expand the Snoring Center, which helps patients with snoring and sleep apnea problems. The ear, nose and throat doctor is seeing strong demand for his services.

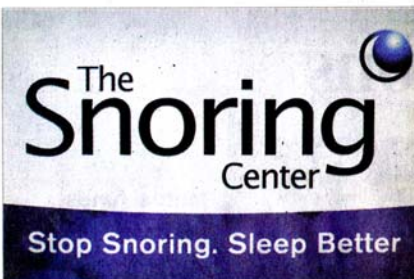
anesthesiologist. They moved to Dallas in 2000.

Cocktail chitchat led Dr. Schwimmer into the snoring and sleep apnea business. People were mildly interested when he told them he was an ENT doctor.

"But when I said, 'I treat snoring and sleep apnea,' there was this visceral, 'Can you see my husband tomorrow?' " he recalls. "I thought, 'There's a big unmet need here.' "

Four years ago, he set up a business within his ENT practice, calling it the Snoring Center of Dallas.

He placed small ads in the health section of *The Dallas Morning News*: "Snoring Driving You Crazy?" "Not Sleeping With Your Wife?" These headlines were followed



Dr. Schwimmer began placing small ads in *The Dallas Morning News* four years ago and now has a logo.

with a little blurb about new minimally invasive and less painful procedures.

The more he advertised, the busier he got.

By early 2006, the Snoring Center and his ENT practice were roughly equal. He bought a small medical building with two signs and two entrances.

Two days a week, the Snoring Center door was open. Three days a week, sick patients entered the door of Dr. Craig Schwimmer, M.D.

But the dual focus quickly wore thin. Business trumped pure medicine by year's end.

"I realized that the Snoring Center was a scalable business with really attractive exit options if I did things correctly," says Dr. Schwimmer. "I could hire other doctors, open offices in other cities. Then someone either gobbles me up or I become the H&R Block of snoring."

Expansion plans have been on hold while he tried to drum up investment capital. That might be about to change. The Snoring Center may soon get

\$5 million from an investor group, which would be enough to open 11 company stores, he says.

Ken May is a pal, not a patient. The former chief executive of FedEx Kinko's thinks his friend has a good shot at turning this into a reality.

"Craig's a rare blend of someone who has medical expertise and entrepreneurial insight along with incredible people skills. He's the total package. One thing an entrepreneur has to do is sell. Craig can sell."

Quiet enough

Dr. Schwimmer doesn't claim that the Pillar procedure is perfect.

"Up to 80 percent of sleep apnea patients have clinically significant improvement," he says. "Up to 90 percent of snorers have had partner satisfaction. That's the outcome measure, seriously. You're quiet enough to make your wife happy."

Fitness guru Larry North was an obnoxious snorer.

"It was an embarrassment at movies, planes and everywhere else I fell asleep," Mr. North says. "One day my girlfriend's daughter videotaped me. At first, I denied that it was real. Then it was like, 'Holy ... that is the worst ever. I sounded like the fat guy in the old Laurel and Hardy movies.' "

The man of steel is a wuss when it comes to traditional surgery, so the idea of a few stitches in the back of his throat appealed to him.

"The procedure is as easy as they say it is. It took six weeks for it all to kick in, but my noise has been cut by 80 percent," Mr. North says. "I sleep like a normal person, and my loved ones appreciate the peace and quiet."