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SCUBA

An acronym for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus

PULMONOLOGY

A branch of medicine concerned with lung function, diseases, and structure

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It makes perfect sense that a physician who evaluates, diagnoses, and treats the lungs, airways, and breathing muscles would take up a hobby like recreational scuba diving for underwater adventures involving oxygen regulation. Right?

During the week, Marc M. Seelagy, MD, tends to patients as a board-certified pulmonologist assessing the diseases and disorders of the lungs and the overall respiratory system. However, when he is on vacation, it is his own respiration that becomes a priority as he takes to the water as an experienced scuba diver.

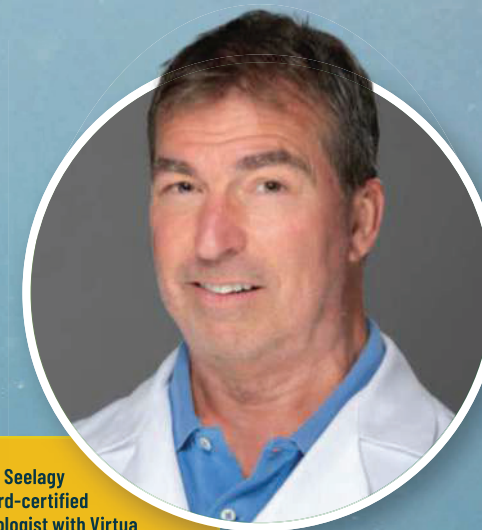
Not until he was 60 years old did he decide to progress from simply snorkeling along the water's surface in shallow waters to taking a literal deep dive in pursuit of certification in scuba with his wife Maryann. Having some trepidation at first since he is a bit claustrophobic, he completed the demanding training in 2019 which involved exercises like removing and putting on the dive mask underwater, and emergency scenarios such as running out of air. Now the couple have their own diving equipment and only need to rent the weights and prefilled tanks.

"Does diving make me a better pulmonologist or is it that pulmonology makes me a better diver? I think it's a little bit of both," said Dr. Seelagy, whose practice is with the Virtua Medical Group in Bordentown.

"I'm more of a respiratory physiologist. I've always been interested in the process of breathing, the physics of it, the mechanics of it, how it happens, why it happens."

When he's not caring for patients, Dr. Marc Seelagy explores coral reefs and marine life through scuba diving — a hobby that deepens his appreciation for the science of breathing and lung health.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Marc Seelagy



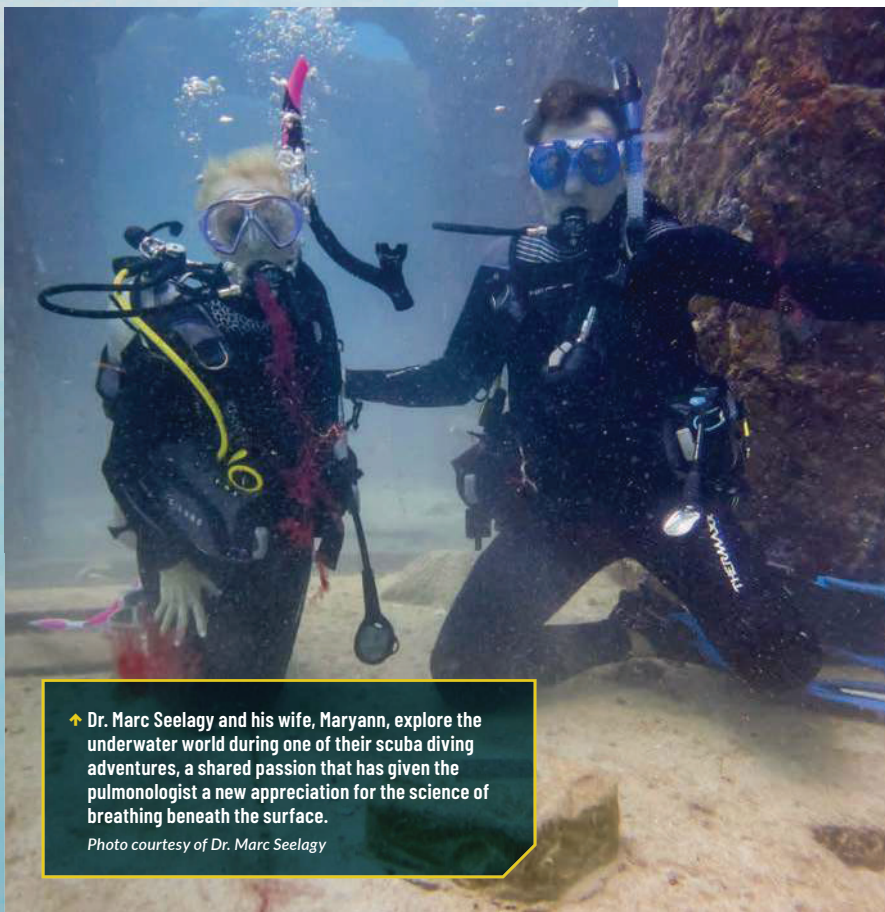
Dr. Marc Seelagy is a board-certified pulmonologist with Virtua Medical Group who combines his expertise in respiratory health with a passion for scuba diving.

Photo courtesy of Virtua Health

BY DEBRA STEVCO MILLER

Deep Breaths

How scuba diving made one New Jersey pulmonologist an even better doctor



✦ Dr. Marc Seelagy and his wife, Maryann, explore the underwater world during one of their scuba diving adventures, a shared passion that has given the pulmonologist a new appreciation for the science of breathing beneath the surface.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Marc Seelagy



✦ Dr. Marc Seelagy reviews a patient's scan with two Virtua critical care nurses.

Photo courtesy of Virtua Health

His curiosity extends to the all-important scuba regulator, which allows individuals to breathe underwater. As explained on the scuba.com website, the regulator's primary function is to decrease the high pressure under which the air in your dive tank is stored to a safer pressure at which you can breathe at any depth.

"It's like the regulator is a pressure support ventilator which I use all the time at work," he said. "I found the whole mechanics of it fascinating. It gives me something to think about when I'm under there."

Always diving with a guide, he and his wife can submerge to around 65 feet but usually remain at a depth of between 40 to 50 feet. While he won't handle the sea snakes that Maryann readily accepts from their guide, Dr. Seelagy prefers to scope out his favorite marine mollusk, the octopus. On their many adventures, the pair have seen tiger barracuda, sea turtles, rock fish, and beautiful coral reefs — some of which are being devastated by invasive lion fish. So, on a few occasions the two have joined in to help catch these predators and, upon returning to the surface, enjoy a delicious seafood dish — minus the venomous lionfish spikes, of course.

Another highlight in one of his sea explorations was an encounter with a reef shark swimming directly toward him. He decided to straddle the creature by lifting his legs up and over the shark allowing it to continue on its way.

While Dr. Seelagy opines that just about anyone at any age can scuba dive, he recommends having a conversation with a pulmonologist first since certain conditions, like asthma, would need to be controlled before attempting such a challenge to the lungs and body. Based on how deep or how long someone will be underwater does affect the equation of nitrox (nitrogen and oxygen) in the air tank for reducing the risk of decompression sickness.

"There are all kinds of complications from diving you can get if you're not careful," he said. "It really allows me to understand the complications that can happen when you do things wrong — like if you surface too fast."

He likens it to a bad asthma attack which causes the lungs to expand precipitously.

"It all ties together. It's really interesting," he added.

His professional relaxation advice to help ease anxiety for breathing that causes a little pain — for himself when diving, and for his patients who think something might be amiss — is simple.

"I do what I tell patients: your breathing is fine. Take a breath, feel your air movement. Air's going in, air's going out. There's nothing wrong," he reassures them.

During appointments, he sometimes even shares his enthusiasm for scuba with his patients; some of whom also enjoy submerging themselves into the deep. In fact, he is considering joining them on a future dive. ❖