

Case Studies

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6-year-old Child Drowns at Community Swimming Pool

A 6-year-old child drowned at a community swimming pool with 4 Lifeguards on duty. The child had been left unattended for several minutes in the shallow end of the pool while her guardian was in the locker room with another child. The child somehow progressed into the deeper section of the pool and her distress went unrecognized for approximately 4 - 6 minutes.

Prior to the incident, there were approximately 20 children participating in swim team practice in two lanes of the pool under the supervision of the swim coach. Two Lifeguards were positioned in the elevated Lifeguard stands, with two other Lifeguards on duty in the office or on the deck, supervising 6 people in the shallow end of the pool and 2 children using the diving boards in the diving section.

The 6-year-old non-swimmer became unconscious and floated motionless towards the deep section of the pool. When an adult patron finally observed the child, she alerted one of the Lifeguards who then implemented the facility's Emergency Response Plans. The child was immediately removed from the pool and CPR was initiated and maintained until Fire Department EMS Personnel arrived on the scene. The child was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

During trial, when the deep-end Lifeguard was asked why she hadn't noticed the child, she replied "I was looking in the deep end of the pool". When asked how long she was watching the deep end only, she replied, "It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes". Needless to say, this surveillance procedure was in clear violation of the procedures advocated by the 10/20 and 30-Second Rules.

Child Drowns at Community Swimming Lake

A 6-year-old child drowned at a community swimming lake run by the city Parks and Recreation Department with 8 Lifeguards on duty.

Two unattended Asian-speaking 6-year-old children had been left at the lake by their father. Both children were playing at the lake and hanging onto the lifeline when one of the children slipped off the line and submerged below the surface of the water. While one child began screaming for help, neither of the 4 Lifeguards situated in elevated Lifeguard stands or on the floating pier recognized the incident or heard the child screaming. A 16-year-old patron went to the aid of the screaming child and brought her to one of the Lifeguards. When the teenager told the Lifeguard she thought the child's companion was in trouble in the water, the Lifeguard refused to assist and stated the child must be in the locker room. The teenager then went to another Lifeguard and voiced the same concerns. The second Lifeguard then got off her stand, without alerting the other Lifeguards, and began an informal search for the child. When the 4 Lifeguards who were on break in the guard room came down to the beach to relieve the guards providing supervision, they saw the Lifeguard searching around the water for the child. The Lifeguard Supervisor immediately evacuated everyone from the water and organized the Lifeguards to conduct a formal search. The child was located within 40 seconds of the search. Unfortunately, the formal search was not initiated until approximately 10 minutes after the child slipped below the surface.

CPR was immediately administered and continued to the hospital by Fire and Rescue personnel where the child was pronounced dead on arrival.

Child Drowns in Community Swimming Pool

A 7-year-old child drowned in a community swimming pool operated by the Parks and Recreation Department with two Lifeguards on duty. The child was last seen diving off the diving board when he began to choke and struggle in the water. The two Lifeguards had been standing side-by-side talking to one another next to the elevated Lifeguard stand and failed to observe the child's distress. Another child saw the victim and ran to the Lifeguards in order to get their attention. The Lifeguards removed the child from the water and began CPR which was continued until EMS personnel arrived on the scene. The child was transported to the hospital where he died several days later from complications resulting from the near-drowning.

Child Drowns in Municipal Swimming Pool

On June 10, 1997, a 5-year-old child drowned at the swimming pool owned and operated by the City of Nitro, West Virginia. The child came into distress and subsequently suffered the physical and neurological trauma associated with a near-drowning as a result of this submersion incident. The child survived for seven days but died on June 17, 1997 as a result of this near-drowning incident.

Prior to the recognition of the child's distress, there were 4 Lifeguard personnel on duty. Two Lifeguards were stationed in elevated Lifeguard stands, while a third Lifeguard was standing alongside the deep-end Lifeguard stand talking with the seated Lifeguard.

The normal operating procedure for this pool was for two Lifeguards to be assigned and stationed in two of the three elevated Lifeguard stands, while the other two Lifeguards were allowed to rest inside the adjacent locker room building. Other duties required of the non-stationed Lifeguards included walking around the pool and picking up trash, as well as checking and cleaning the locker rooms. When the pool was crowded, one of the two non-stationed Lifeguards would normally be assigned to the third elevated Lifeguard stand. At the time of the incident, the Head Lifeguard intended to assign and station the 3rd Lifeguard but had not yet made that assignment when the incident occurred.

When the child's distress was realized, he was unconscious and in respiratory and cardiac arrest on the bottom of the 5' section of the swimming pool. His distress was not recognized by any of the 4 Lifeguards on duty, but rather, by a juvenile swimmer who attempted to rescue the child by bringing him to the surface. After the child was pulled to the side of the pool, the Lifeguards removed him from the water and initiated Basic Life Support CPR procedures until relieved by Fire and Rescue personnel.

One year later, while conducting a site visit at this pool to investigate this incident further, the Lifeguards all seemed very vigilant and diligent in their duties. However, we were only allowed to observe the Lifeguards and the pool for the hour prior to the pool opening to the public. While we were there, however, we did observe many problems associated with the maintenance and upkeep of the pool and the preparedness of the Lifeguard personnel to respond to emergencies. These problems were as follows:

1. The Lifeguard stands were in a state of disrepair with broken seats, foot-rests, and ladders.
2. The bottom of the pool was dirty and in need of vacuuming and brushing.
3. The pool bottom had a sloping hopper bottom from the sides to the middle. Because of this configuration, the diving board should have been removed and all head-first entries into the water should have been prohibited.
4. The backboard was sub-standard, and the straps and head immobilizer were not ready for use in an emergency.
5. There were no suitably posted rules and regulations. The only signage we saw was an 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of paper hanging in the lobby with pool rules.
6. An exposed suction drain was found on the wall of the 5' area of the pool which was large enough for a child to have his hand and arm sucked into it up to his armpit.

We returned to the pool area several hours later and were surprised by what we saw. Each section of the pool was open to the public, but not one Lifeguard was observed on any of the three Lifeguard stands. Upon further investigation, we found three Lifeguards in the lobby of the locker room building talking and eating, while one Lifeguard provided surveillance for the entire pool while standing on the deck at a corner of the pool (note: see individual in white T-shirt).

We were extremely surprised to find this type of attitude and operation, especially considering the fact that a drowning of a child had occurred the previous year.

Navy Seal Drowns in Shallow End of Honolulu Municipal Swimming Pool

On March 26, 1998, a Navy Seal who was training for the U.S. Free Diving Team, approached the two Lifeguards on duty at a municipal swimming pool and explained he was training to hold his breath for a prolonged period of time while underwater in order to gain a spot on the U.S. Free Diving Team. The Lifeguards gave the individual permission to practice in the shallow end of the pool. This individual then went to the shallow end, directly in front of the Lifeguard stand, went through a series of breathing and swimming exercises, then hyperventilated and attempted to hold his breath, while still located in the shallow end directly in front of the Lifeguard stand. In order to assist him in staying underwater, he draped a weight belt across his hips.

Meanwhile the Lifeguards, rather than being appropriately stationed in the elevated Lifeguard stands, both sat together under the tarp on deck-level bleachers on the opposite end of the pool. According to testimony provided by the Lifeguards, they lost site of this individual, and several patrons approached the Lifeguards and asked by the man was laying on the bottom of the pool. Their reply was that he was practicing holding his breath.

Approximately 30 minutes after the individual submerged himself in the shallow end of the water, the Lifeguards investigated the potential incident and when they realized he was in trouble, they entered the water and removed him. Emergency resuscitation procedures were not effective because of the prolonged submersion time.

The Lifeguards had failed to recognize the risk this individual was engaged in by hyperventilating and prolonged breath-holding underwater without direct one-on-one supervision by another responsible adult. They should have either prevented the individual from engaging in this activity, or should have provided direct vigilant supervision of him.

The Lifeguards failed to provide vigilant and effective surveillance of the pool and the surrounding area to (A) enforce rules and regulations; (B) assess the status of all patrons in and around the water; (C) perform rescues when required. Their surveillance was entirely ineffective in that they did not conform to both the 30-Second Surveillance Rule or the 10/20 Surveillance/Response Rule. Because of their failure to recognize the incident or its potential, they were not able to effectively manage the incident, due to the prolonged submersion time of the victim.

It was our opinion that the Lifeguard personnel at this facility failed to prevent the drowning incident of this individual by prohibiting him from engaging in this activity. They failed to recognize his distress once he lost consciousness while underwater. And, because of the prolonged delay in recognizing his distress, the possibility of a successful rescue/resuscitation was non-existent.