TOPIC: Breath-Hold Swimming and Diving

NORTHEAST: 02/05/2008 – [Victim], a 16-year-old member of the [name] Aquatics Club passed out and nearly drowned while practicing for SEAL training in a pool at the [name] YMCA pool on Feb. 18.

A post mortem examination by the [county] Medical Examiner’s Office concluded that [victim] had drowned. The official cause of death was cited as “anoxic-ischemic encephalopathy and acute respiratory distress syndrome.”

The U.S. Naval Safety Center warns that underwater breath-holding swim drills can cause blackouts that lead to drowning. An article at www.safetycenter.navy.mil states that trainees who are required to participate in breath-holding exercises must be closely supervised and stay in an observer’s direct line of sight.

[Name], executive director of the [name] YMCA, said, “At this time of such sadness and grieving, out of respect for the [victim] family, we’re just not prepared to comment right now. We’re going to keep the [family] in our prayers.”

A service was held at 10 am Friday in [name] Church in [town]. [Victim] was only 1 miles from his dream of defending other people, said [father]. “In his mind, the SEALs were his mission.”

[Victim], a YMCA lifeguard, had been submerged for about two minutes on Feb. 18 when lifeguards saw him face down in the pool, [town] police said. He was on a break and apparently practicing for SEAL training.

[Father] said the family isn’t sure whether he was attempting to hold his breath underwater or practicing diving. "It’s a mystery," he said. “The only thing we have is theories about him.”

Mission accomplished: [Victim] wanted to join the military a year ago after listening to his grandfather tell stories from his days in the Navy. “Before that he was kind of a regular teenager,” he said. "But once he chose that, he got focused and became a man overnight.”

The pallbearers were arranged by [victim]’s Navy recruiter, Petty Officer 2nd Class [name], 35, of [city]. [Recruiter] said [victim] visited his office regularly and couldn’t wait to join the Navy in September.

[Victim] was “a good, solid student” who belonged to a modern dance team at [name] High School, said principal [name]. He remembered [victim] as a “wide-eyed freshman” who grew up during his high school years. “Four years later, he had emerged into this strong, mature young man who looked you in the eye and knew where he wanted to go,” [principal] said. [Victim] wanted to join the Navy to “do the biggest thing he could do to protect and defend other people,” [principal] said. “In his mind, the SEALs were where he could make that grand contribution.”

[Father] said his son first showed an interest in joining the military two years ago after listening to his grandfather tell stories from his days in the Navy.

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underwater lengths without breathing and was on the third lap when the coach and lifeguard recognized that he was no longer moving and extricated him. He began breathing without rescue breathing or CPR, but was sent to the hospital for observation and a thorough examination.

SOUTHEAST: 02/04/2008 – A member of the [name] High School Swim Team nearly lost his life during practice at the [name] YMCA. Reportedly [name] was in the process of a no-breath drill that was to consist of swimming 50 yards underwater without taking a breath.

[Victim], age 15, had made the turn and was nearing the end when a teammate and the coach noticed that he had sunk to about six feet below the surface. With help from a lifeguard they got him out of the water where he spontaneously started breathing again, but went into convulsions. By the time the paramedics arrived 10 minutes later the convulsions had ceased but he was still transported to [name] hospital where he was admitted and held two days for observation.

[Victim] had swum about 300 yards of freestyle, breast stroke, and butterfly to warm up before the no-breath drill, which was intended to help prepare him for the upcoming state meet.

What we know:

- Breath-hold swimming and diving (or hypoxic training) is extremely dangerous - both active (like the three examples above) and passive forms have resulted in deaths.
- The benefits of hypoxic training are theoretical and have never been medically demonstrated – the detriments are real and are well documented
- Warnings against breath-hold training are numerous – all major aquatic authorities denounce or strongly caution against it – The Redwoods Group stance is unequivocal – it should be forbidden in any managed body of water and violators should lose access privileges

What we don’t understand:

- Why some coaches and swimmers
  - cannot accurately make simple cost-benefit calculations – clearly the proven potential cost outweighs any possible theoretical benefit
  - continue to believe without proof that such a practice will be beneficial to their swimming efforts
  - subscribe to the illusionary belief “it won’t happen to me”
  - believe that pool or organization rules against specified practices are meant only for the general public and not for them
- Why so many pool operators continue to allow the practice

What must be remembered:

- Hypoxia is a very deceptive foe – you don’t know that you are losing until you have lost
- the young man above whose death is recorded indicated to the lifeguard by pointing to his watch that he was fine shortly before he was found unconscious
- one of the historic deaths in a pool was to a hypoxia training coach
- By those who manage bodies of water
  - There are people who will insist on participating in either active or passive hypoxic training – you may not be able to stop their behavior but you can stop them from doing it in your water
  - If you don’t stop such behavior in your managed body of water and someone dies
    - they are dead and feel nothing and don’t have the opportunity to regret
    - you only wish you were dead, feel horrible and have the rest of your life to regret
    - you and your association may even be liable for your actions or lack thereof

DON’T TAKE THE RISK

BAN ALL FORMS OF HYPOXIC TRAINING IN ANY BODY OF WATER THAT YOU MANAGE. BE DILIGENT IN RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING ANY SUCH BEHAVIOR. PROTECT YOUR SWIMMERS AND YOUR LIFEGUARDS.

Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at www.redwoodsgroup.com to learn more about YMCA risk management issues.