The Editor’s offering

In the analysis of diving fatalities, it has been said frequently that drowning is not a diagnosis, a cause must be looked for. Causation is often difficult to establish. Many potential factors – bad diving practice and poor decision making, contributing environmental conditions, concomitant medical problems, etc – combined with second-hand knowledge, conflicting eye-witness reports, inadequate police investigations and incomplete autopsy procedures mean that the truth is elusive in many cases. This is partly because the investigations may be conducted, with the best of intentions, by people who know little or nothing of scuba diving and with little guidance as to how to go about such investigations. As a result, surveys of diving fatalities such as those by the Divers Alert Network1 in the USA and Project Stickybeak2 in Australia have been hampered in their analysis of causation by the gaps in the information and the failure to ask the right questions.

This was also frequently true of coroners’ autopsies in divers. Diving autopsies are undertaken to determine the immediate cause(s) of death, and to explore and identify potential underlying causes. Whilst drowning is often the terminal event, this is a diagnosis of exclusion made at the end of a full examination of the evidence and the deceased’s body. In the 20-year review (1980–2000) of New Zealand fatalities, only about half the autopsies were conducted in accordance with recommended guidelines.3 In Australia and New Zealand, this is now changing. New police guidelines for diving fatality investigations, combined with detailed autopsy advice and the involvement at an early stage in the investigation of physicians experienced in diving medicine should ensure that as much information as possible is gleaned from each such tragedy.

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia has for many years promulgated guidelines for autopsy in divers, but getting investigators to use this information has been a problem. Recently, Drs Lawrence and Cooke updated this information, which is freely available on the College website (www.rcpa.edu.au). However, it was felt that this excellent monograph needed wider promulgation amongst the diving medical community to enhance understanding of what should be involved and the difficulties inherent in interpreting autopsy findings.

Linked to this topic (we do not want them to die) is the ongoing debate regarding whether asthmatics should scuba dive and if so what criteria should be used in assessing their suitably or otherwise. Widely differing views have been promulgated in the past by such learned groups as the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ)4 and the British Thoracic Society Fitness to Dive Group.5 Recently, the TSANZ revisited this issue in a discussion paper in the Thoracic Society News, which drew a vigorous response from one respiratory physician. This was timely as it had been intended to invite several respiratory clinicians and scientists to contribute to just such a debate in the SPUMS Journal in the near future. Instead, we re-publish the TSANZ material in this issue for members to consider. Please contribute to this debate. We would like to think that some combined recommendations could come out of the two societies working together on this thorny issue. It is noteworthy that some recent papers with new data do not appear in the bibliography of the TSANZ material.6,7

In 2003, the Society Executive was asked to review the need for medical assessment of users of a new underwater tourist device, the ‘Scubadoo’. Quoting from the minutes of the Committee teleconference of 5 August 2003, “the consensus...was that Scuba Doo should follow the guidelines set out by Workplace Health and Safety.” Dr Simpson, following a single-subject study suggests otherwise here. As he points out, the data could be predicted from basic principles (succinctly laid out by Camporesi and Bosco8), and he argues that the risks involved in this activity are minimal. What do you think? Registrations are going well for this year’s ASM. Keep them coming!

References


Michael Davis

Front cover photo of two technical divers using underwater scooters taken by Dr Simon Mitchell at about 40 msw depth at the Poor Knights Islands, where the 2007 SPUMS ASM diving will be held.