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Seven "deadly" Sins for Aquatic Facilities

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When managing an aquatic facility, there is so much to look for in safeguarding guests that this task can appear to be burdensome and overwhelming to many. But as I review accidents and court cases throughout the country, it becomes apparent that there are a few common, recurring lapses that often result in catastrophic accidents and lawsuits. While this list does not cover all the accident possibilities and it is certainly not a complete risk management guide, at least it is a quick list of significant flaws that still exist in many aquatic facilities. While each of these safety violations may not result in death or drowning, they can definitely adversely affect your facility. Check these areas first, when initiating a risk management plan for your facility:

1. Lack of a Certified Aquatic Facility Operator (AFO)

Ronald Gilbert, a retired attorney specializing in water safety litigation, has adamantly stated that the missing link in all his successful trials was the lack of a certified AFO/CPO on duty at the time at the accident. It is apparent that the certified AFO is much more of a risk manager than the lifeguards on duty and he/she appreciates the consequences of breaches in safety and the standard of care.

2. Lack of a Group-Use Policy

Many groups (i.e. church, school, or civic) are attracted to aquatic facilities because they provide certified lifeguards who not only protect guests, but also provide free baby-sitting and a break for teachers, parents and counselors. When lifeguards see these groups coming, they tend to relax because they assume the adults will be watching the children. This is a major miscommunication: the adults expect the lifeguards to be watching children, and the lifeguards expect the adults to be watching the children, so rather than having double coverage, you end up having trouble. It is shocking how quickly children drown during a field trip to the pool! Group-use policies should should risk management issues such as adult to child ratios, PFD use, non-swimmer rules, and more.

3. Failure to Warn Against the Head-First Entry

We now know that it takes real deep water to prevent catastrophic head and neck injuries whenever a head first entry is attempted at an aquatic facility. The magic depth for safety when attempting any dive is somewhere between nine and ten feet, regardless of the height from which the dive is attempted. We must aggressively and creatively utilize a variety of signs, graphics, and warnings to prevent head-first entries from the side of the pool in all aquatic facilities. Please remember these two facts: it takes less than two seconds to render a patron quadriplegic in our aquatic facilities, but at the same time, springboard diving has never had a safety problem in this country. Dumb head-first entries are dangerous, not springboard diving. In reality, nothing will separate a fool from his mission. Even the most aggressive campaign to stop diving into shallow water may not be successful, but at least your defensive strategies will assist you in a court of law.

Submitting Articles

If you are interested in submitting an article to be published in *From the Stand*, please contact TPPC at info@tppc.org. We are always looking for fresh ideas and new articles.

Also, view the [Submission Guidelines](#) for instructions on submitting an article for *From the Stand*.

4. Failure to Warn Against Breath-Holding and Underwater Swimming

Competitive, repetitive breath-holding drills and games are extremely dangerous and must be curtailed in all bodies of water. While the physiology of the underwater event is complicated, the results are quite simple —death by drowning or cardiac arrhythmia. Breath-holding and underwater swimming causes accidents with our better swimmers so they often go undetected when problems arise. When it comes to breath-holding in the water, the rule should be simple and clear - Just Don't Do It!

5. Failure to Guard Children of Tender Years

Seventy percent of all preschoolers who drown were in the care of one or both parents at the time of the accident. Parents typically are distracted from watching their children at our facilities and in addition, are unable to recognize when their children are at risk or in trouble. We must be more vigilant in supervising children under the age of seven and children in the shallow waters of our facilities. We must also remind parents to watch their children. Where parents and toddlers congregate, use shallow water guards or safety lookouts when fully certified lifeguards are not adequate in number.

6. Failure to Post and Follow a Fecal Accident Policy

Although the drowning rate is decreasing in our country, more people are getting sick in our facilities. Most of the illnesses are caused by enteric pathogens which follow the fecal/oral route. Fortunately, because of the renewed interest in water quality, it is now socially acceptable and politically correct to talk about poop in the pool! You must educate your guests how to prevent illnesses through good hygiene, explain your fecal accident procedure, and turn up the chlorinator. In addition to safeguarding our patrons, a good "poop policy" will help to keep your pool water clean and clear.

7. Failure to Protect Against Entrapments and Entanglements

Any drain or outlet can cause a severe entrapment/entanglement risk in our aquatic facilities but particularly those that have single outlets leading to a circulation pump. A variety of strategies must be utilized to prevent these injuries, including intact grates, anti-vortex covers, multiple outlets, and emergency shut-offs. Ironically, many lifeguards and facility operators do not understand or appreciate the entrapment hazards that exist in their pools.

About the Author

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