

RISK ASSESSMENT OF CHILD SAFETY IN SWIMMING POOLS

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Context

Over the past thirteen years the Institute of Sport & Recreation Management has advocated that children under the age of eight need to be accompanied in swimming pools. The guidance issued by the Institute in 1992 to pool operators was that children under 8 years of age should be accompanied into pools on a 1:2 basis and children under 5 on a 1:1 basis. In 2002 the Institute concluded a two-year period of consultation and review of the issues relating to child safety and the application of their guidance to ensure that it balanced changes in society with the actual level of risk. For instance, there are relatively few swimming pool drownings in the UK but an increasing number of single-parent families who would have to get a friend to help if they have more than one child.

As a result of the review, the Institute amended its advice to lower the age at which it was thought children needed to be accompanied on a 1:1 basis, and drew the attention of pool operators to the need to risk assess their own circumstances, and to adopt policies that reflected the identified level of risk. Children are bigger and more advanced than ever before, and yet parents are more likely to use swimming pools as a 'baby sitting' service, and are far more litigious when things go wrong. There is a general trend in the UK, following that of America, to sue for compensation in the event of any incident or accident.

After issuing the new guidance, the Institute is still (three years on) getting little outbursts of adverse publicity across the UK, as pool operators adopt the guidance, and family groups are inconvenienced. In fact in some geographical areas, pool operators appeared to be so scared of ending up in court as a result of not implementing national guidance, that many families were being refused entry to swim unless, in operator terms, there were enough adults to supervise children. This became such an issue in one area of the country that a campaign pressure group was set up, and eventually a question was asked in the House of Commons of Prime Minister, Tony Blair appealing for him to intervene!

The Institute of Sport & Recreation Management, a body independent of government financial support or control, is concerned about the impact on society and the risk of families being turned away from swimming pools unnecessarily. Therefore it has been in discussions with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and officers and Ministers of the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) on the wording of its guidance, its implementation and its impact upon society. This paper looks at the Institute's changing views as a result of this feedback from customers, upon the way it manages its services and the way things are now moving in child safety in swimming pools in the UK.

Project

It was clear from the type of complaints that the Institute has received - including some direct from members of the public who had been referred to it by the managers of the pools who had turned them away - that the guidance was not being interpreted in the way which was intended. It also appeared that, if more people were being inconvenienced, after the Institute had made the guidance more flexible, then the previous guidance could not have been universally adopted. The area that seemed to cause most difficulty to families was where there were children under the age of four. It was also clear that far too many pool operators were risk-averse and looking for a safety blanket under which they could hide, rather than seeking to ensure opportunities for families to swim. .

There is tension between the demands of management for cut-and-dried advice and of some customers asking for unfettered access. The Institute therefore undertook further consultation and a survey of its members to try to assess the scope of the problem. DCMS in the meanwhile hosted a series of meetings in London bringing together the Institute, the campaign group and other voices for swimming and pool safety in the UK. DCMS also commissioned a MORI Poll to find out what the public at large thought, as opposed to what the vociferous and protesting minority was saying.

There is undoubtedly a general view that the guidance is right, and that it accurately reflects good practice. There are question marks about its implementation. The Institute stands by the guidance given, but is concerned that the messaging and the culture at this time are out of synch, and therefore it needs to be put across in a different way. It is also accepted that there is no real knowledge of the precise level of risk to children - the only mechanism that might have measured this was abandoned by the government as part of a cost-cutting exercise. There are no records of near misses or rescues involving children in pools in the UK, although some assessment measurements were tentatively raised in the Institute's survey, and which give some indication as to the level of risk. It is clear, though, that there is a low incidence of drownings in UK pools, and it is suspected that the policy guidance the Institute offered over the preceding 13 years may have had a hand in creating this situation.

The Institute, therefore, has reviewed what is said in its guidance in line with what is happening on the ground and have re-written the paper once again, this time in consultation with the Health & Safety Executive and DCMS. The approach has been to emphasise that a risk assessment process is essential, that all pools may need to have different policies, as opposed to corporate policies across all pools in an authority, and that being able to swim, wearing arm bands and staying in shallow water all make a significant difference to the ability of adults to supervise young children in swimming pools. Children still need to be accompanied in swimming pools.

Results

At this point in time the Institute awaits final consultation with the Secretary of State as to whether its rewording of the document meets the Government's objectives of providing safety advice without unnecessary restriction. This does not mean that there should be no restriction but that the restrictions should reflect the level of risk.

Discussions/implications

What will happen at the pools that have already adopted the guidance? Will the Institute be thought to be letting them down by changing its stance, or will this be seen as positive, responsive and supportive of managers' difficulties? Will changes compromise safety, making our pools less safe in the future? What do other European countries do, and what advice can they offer to pools in the UK?

References

ISRM (1992) *Children in swimming pools* ISRM: Loughborough
ISRM (2002) *Children in swimming pools*: ISRM: Loughborough

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