

# SWIMMING TO SAFETY

Aquatic safety and drown prevention top the priorities for Y safety professionals.

By Thomas Marcetti

**A**quatics safety and drown prevention programs at the Y are some of the strongest, most successful in the U.S. But that doesn't mean safety professionals are resting any easier.

Keeping people safe in the water means constant vigilance and adaptation to societal trends.

"Although the number of drownings at Ys is very low when compared to other organizations, even one loss is too many," says Derek Eversdyke, director of facility safety products at Clarion Safety Systems. "I attended the YMCA Risk Management Conference this past October in Chicago. They talked about the top three concerns risk management professionals lose sleep over. Water safety was right up there."

Eversdyke says Clarion works with many Ys across the country, and aquatic safety and drown prevention is one of the toughest challenges Ys are facing — especially when it comes to children.

"Pools represent a serious risk, especially for young people who are unable to swim well or at all," Eversdyke says. "I've heard staff members at Ys and other aquatic facilities say that parents typically don't go in the water with their children, and that needs to change. Drowning is the main cause of death for children between the ages of 1 and 4, and 88 percent of child drowning deaths occur with a parent nearby."

The good news, says Gareth Hedges, chief claims officer for The Redwoods Group, is that drowning deaths across the Y have declined significantly in recent years. In the past 15 years, drownings at Ys have gone from 12-15 per year to 0-2 per year.

Hedges says Redwoods has specialized almost specifically in insurance with Ys since 1997, and the group currently insures about half of the Ys in the country.

"We have a strong focus on keeping Ys safe," Hedges says. "Whenever someone is pulled from a pool, we're out there to investigate. So we're able to tell exactly how people get into trouble in the pool. We can send notices to Ys saying 'Here is what happened. Here is what can be done to prevent it from happening again.'"

Education and training of both staff and members is important. But even those who are confident in their swimming abilities might still end up in hot water. A 2014 American Red Cross survey concluded that 80 percent of Americans think they can swim, but only 56 percent of those swimmers could actually save their own lives if they had to.

That gap — where confident, fit swimmers are getting into trouble — is receiving an increasing amount of attention. Y staff around the country are working to address three growing concerns among aquatic safety professionals.

## HYPOXIC BLACKOUTS

Despite significant advances in aquatic safety made by Ys across the country, many drownings are caused by people putting themselves at risk — especially through extended breath-holding exercises.

"It's a relatively unknown hazard. Strong, fit swimmers are the typical victims," Eversdyke says. "Statistics have shown that this type of drowning compared to what we have known drowning to be for years is a 1:1 ratio. It's a serious concern."

The main culprit is known as hypoxic blackout. In terms of Ys and community swimming areas, hypoxic blackout typically results from the practice of hyperventilation preceding underwater swimming and extended breath-holding. The combination results in oxygen deprivation in the body and unconsciousness.

Sometimes called shallow water blackout — a term that describes a similar condition caused by divers resurfacing too quickly from extreme depths — hypoxic blackout is especially dangerous because there are usually virtually no signs of distress.

Mike Espino, aquatics safety specialist at YMCA of the USA, says the most common cause of this at Ys is people practicing extended-breath holding, even though most Ys ban the practice in their facilities.

"It's an issue all across the country," he says. "There have been deaths due to hypoxic blackout at Ys, and there have been many more deaths from it outside the Y. Many Ys adopt policies to prevent this, and they have been great at educating members. But sometimes the rules are not enforced."



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**Derek Eversdyke**

Director of Facility Safety Products,  
Clarion Safety Systems

Hedges says education and building a culture of aquatic safety are crucial. Hedges says lifeguards are human. Humans can fail; that's why aquatic education and layers of protection are so important. When we have a drowning it's because policy wasn't followed."

However, existing aquatic safety policies likely need to be changed to address another major concern.

**MEDICAL EVENTS**

The increase in medical events in pools is a particularly troubling trend.

"If someone has a heart attack on the treadmill, people see them. While they are waiting to get care, they can breathe," Hedges says. "If someone has a heart attack mid-stroke in the pool, there isn't a sound. There isn't splashing — like what usually accompanies drowning. And they can't breathe. They can't breathe during the time it takes for someone to see or while help is on the way."

While there is a wide range of medical emergencies that become more dangerous in pools, heart issues tend to be the most common. Espino says these life-threatening medical events sometimes involve a child with an undiagnosed heart condition, but most often it is an older swimmer.

"Baby Boomers are more engaged. They are staying active, and that is great," Espino says. "It also means there are more people in the pools who are more likely to have heart episodes."

The CDC reported that deaths related to heart disease had been on the decline from 1985 to 2011, but between 2011 and 2014, they jumped up 3 percent. The report states that the increase is largely caused by the aging U.S. population.

"There is nothing you can do to prevent a medical event in the water, but what you do when it happens makes a big difference in the person's chances of survival," Espino says.

With medical events like heart attacks and strokes, every second counts. Training staff to be proactive and be more involved with members can save lives.

"I really encourage aquatic staff to get to know who comes in the water. Looking out for things that are out of the ordinary is crucial. Espino says. "But if you don't know what is normal for a particular person because you don't know them, it becomes much harder to know what is abnormal."

Hedges says having multiple lifeguards on duty is crucial to incident management and identifying medical events.

"Watching someone swim laps is very different from watching kids play. Multiple lifeguards are better able to focus on the different cognitive tasks needed to ensure everyone's safety," he says. "One lifeguard should be scanning the pool, scanning the bottom. One should be walking the pool deck, talking to people. That is where you can better see the medical events. The customer service — saying hi to people, getting to know them, helping them into a lane — that is how you really know what's going on with individuals in the pool. But you can't do that and watch the entire pool simultaneously."



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**Mike Espino**

Aquatics Safety Specialist,  
YMCA of the USA

**TAKING POOL SAFETY TO THE STREETS**

Lindsay Mondick, senior manager of aquatics at YMCA of the USA, says the Safety Around Water community outreach has been a great success. The program, which is now in its second year, involves Y aquatics staff going to pools in the community for training and aquatic safety education.

"The basis of the program is to have a platform to advocate safety and an avenue to create community partnerships to reach at-risk youth," she says.

Through the program, Ys across the country are working with organizations like the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts and with community residents through homeowner associations and apartment complexes. Mondick says the curriculum focuses on two important areas to prevent drowning: how to quickly get off the bottom of the pool and to the side after falling in, and how to float face up and catch their breath.

Debbie Hesse, executive director of USA Swimming Foundation, says the Y's aquatic programming is a significant positive force in communities. USA Swimming Foundation partners with Ys through grant funding, lesson plans, providing supplies, and through their Make a Splash initiative.

According to a 2010 USA Swimming Foundation and University of Memphis study, participation in formal swim lessons can reduce the likelihood of childhood drowning by 88 percent. Hess says 10 people — children and adults — die every day due to drowning and that is too many.

"This is something that we can prevent, so it's important to raise awareness, and the USA Swimming Foundation provides support to swim-lesson providers across the country who ensure children who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity learn to swim," Hess says.

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**Gareth Hedges**  
Chief Claims Officer,  
The Redwoods Group

Staffing multiple lifeguards is easier said than done, especially when finding lifeguards is an increasingly difficult task.

**LIFEGUARD SHORTAGE**

Espino says lifeguards are in short supply across the country and Ys have not been shielded from that. He says the lifeguard shortage has been a problem for many years, but it really came into focus at the end of the Great Recession. When the economy went into an upswing and jobs started coming back, it became even harder to hire lifeguards.

“When everyone was trying to find a job, it wasn’t as bad,” he says. “With the economy better, there are better-paying jobs with less responsibility, less pressure, and less required training.”

In addition, Espino notes that job itself has changed and become more demanding, which also makes it less appealing to some people.

“Lifeguarding is not like it used to be,” Espino says. “Where it used to be one lifeguard watching one pool, we now have facilities with multiple pools, water features, and therapy apparatus. So not only are more lifeguards needed, but the complexity of duties has increased.”

Espino says that some Ys have looked to seniors in the community to help address the shortage. There has been some success in this, but Espino says the effort still runs into the same hurdles: It’s a difficult, demanding job that doesn’t pay very well.

To really address the shortage, Ys may need to reprioritize.

Hedges says re-evaluating the importance of the position is a good start to addressing the shortage. Making the position more professional, expecting more from lifeguards, and compensating them more is a good way to start expanding the pool of potential lifeguards.

“Are you paying that job enough? We need to look at the importance of the position,” Hedges says. “Often times at Ys, we see parties at the pool. Usually there is a lifeguard and a party planner. And most of the time, the party planner is being paid more. Which job is more important?”

This can’t be a cosmetic fix. Just like each Y needs to focus energy on constant education and vigilance, cultural changes need to be made at all levels in regard to aquatic safety and the role of lifeguards.

“The c-suite, managers, leaders, or whoever must understand what a lifeguard means. If we think of a kid sitting in a chair watching people swim — that’s not good enough,” Hedges says. “But if we see an advocate of aquatic safety, an educator who increases the value of camp programs, a front-line customer service representative, and a lifesaver — well, that’s a different story.”



**Thomas Marcetti** is associate editor for *AYP*.