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Bad Reports

Improperly written and completed accident reports cause headaches — and potential liability. Do your guards know how to do them right?

Everyone has left for the day and you are doing the last of the paperwork and filing. Is that last name spelled “Speilvont” or Spillvent”? Was it a “blood spill” on the deck, or a “bluish splot”? The space for EMS response is blank, as is the time of call, but the injury description states that the individual was placed on a backboard. Was EMS involved or not? It’s been a long day and it would be nice if these reports were finished.

More importantly, the questionable content of these reports generates confusion — and potential liability. Accident reports are legal papers. They document not only a situation, but also the care provided by the first responders — your lifeguards. If accident reports are not completed appropriately, you and your facility could be in serious jeopardy.

What constitutes an appropriately completed accident report? Here are seven musts for accident reports, with activities to help you and your staff achieve them:

1 Legible. Every single letter of every word on the report should be clearly readable. If reports are completed by hand, this means either careful printing or clear cursive writing.

Activity. Include some written response assignment in the in-service training. It might be asking for a list of five suggestions for program improvement or describing how someone else has done something helpful for a patron. It could be describing results of a special event. Read the written responses not only for content, but also, more importantly, for legibility. Can you easily read each and every word? Asking someone to copy over the content might

seem childish. However, accepting unreadable material is outright dangerous and sets the precedent that you don’t care. Let your lifeguards know that you MUST be able to read what they write.

2 Complete. All content areas, questions, and blank data spaces should have entries. If an item does not apply to a particular situation, then NA (not applicable) should be entered.

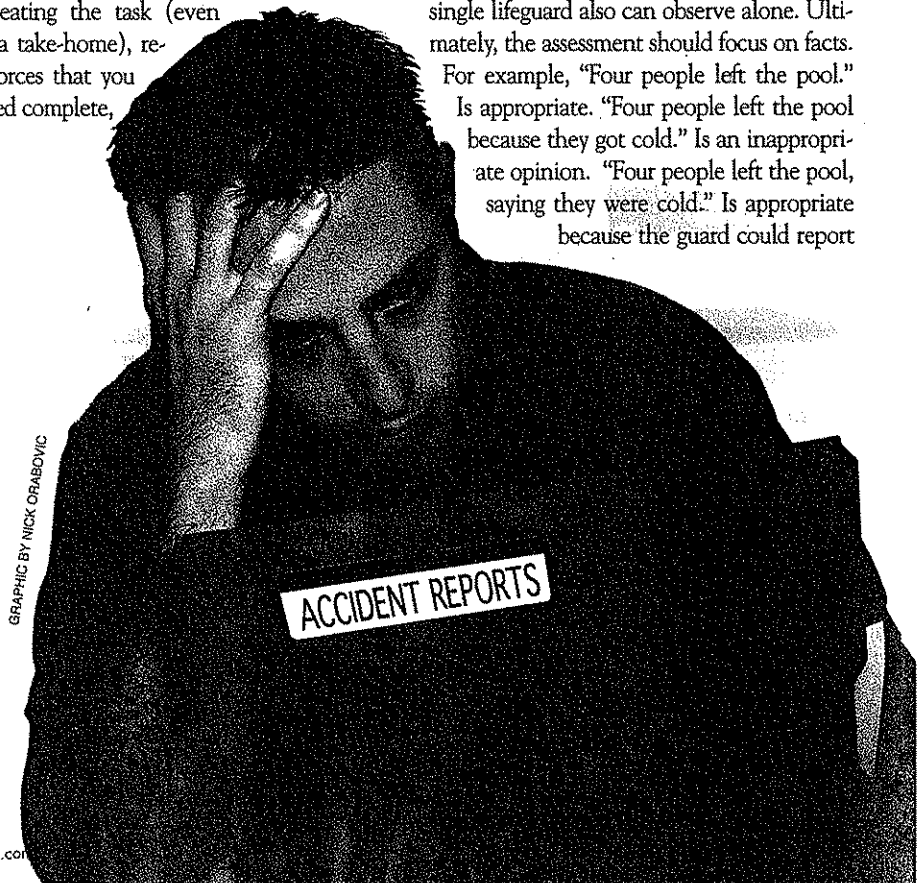
Activity. Periodically update your files on your lifeguards by asking them to complete a new personal employment information form. Even if information has not changed, repeating the task (even as a take-home), reinforces that you need complete,

current, data. Other types of forms to use for this type of activity include your pool opening/closing checklists and your equipment inventory.

3 Unbiased. No opinions should be included. All information should be factual, based on information, action, and observation at the time.

Activity. Ask your guards to observe a 10- to 15-minute session of pool activity and write a paragraph describing what they see. If several guards observe the same time period, following the writing they can compare narrations to see if observations agree. A single lifeguard also can observe alone. Ultimately, the assessment should focus on facts.

For example, “Four people left the pool.” Is appropriate. “Four people left the pool because they got cold.” Is an inappropriate opinion. “Four people left the pool, saying they were cold.” Is appropriate because the guard could report



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what was heard, rather than just report the assumption.

4 Inked. The accident report that goes on file should be completed in ink, type or computer print, not pencil.

Activity. It's best to make this a day-to-day reminder. If ink is used and a mistake is made, white-out is not an alternative. The individual must start over with a new form. Accept only ink on any written items. Keep a supply of pens handy for your guards. Imprint them with the pool logo. Ink is the legal standard, a standard set so evidence in a court of law can be presented in an unaltered state. It is perfectly acceptable to do a rough draft (in pencil) first. The final file copy must be in ink.

5 Signed. The individual completing the report should sign, time and date the report. Once the report is signed, it is considered complete and no information should be altered at a later date or time. If filing additional information is necessary, an addendum should be completed, signed by the addendum-reporting person, and attached.

Activity. A signature means that an individual assumes responsibility for the contents of the document. A signature

must be legible. A scrawl is not appropriate. As an employer, you have the right to require a legible signature. The first place that signature should appear is on the individual's employment application. If you cannot read it there, you know you have work to do with this individual. Request another attempt at completing and signing the form. Any written work during an in-service training should be signed. Any completed pool opening/closing checklist should be signed (not just initialed). Ask for a signature frequently and return any signature work that is not legible. Send the message that the signature matters.

6 Confidential. The information on the accident report should be restricted to those individuals with a legal need to know.

Activity. Information that is shared inappropriately also is frequently shared inaccurately. The easy game of Pass the Secret is a perfect example. In a group of lifeguards, whisper three sentences to the first lifeguard. Then have that guard pass the sentences to the next guard, continuing around the group until every-

one has heard it. Ask the last person to repeat the three sentences. Most likely, the first sentences and the end result will differ considerably — a perfect example of why confidential information should NOT be shared.

7 Filed. Accident reports should be kept in a confidential file in a secure location. Computer-generated confidential reports should be password protected.

Activity. This is another must that can be instilled in guards through day-to-day workings. While filing might be mainly your job, you cannot file reports you do not have. Missing accident reports never get filed. You cannot file an incomplete report. Be sure your lifeguards know when an accident report is mandated. If in doubt, they should write the report. The first responding guard should be the one writing the report. If that guard is incapacitated, then the second responding guard assumes that responsibility. Accident reports should be completed before the guard leaves for the day, if not immediately after the incident. ■

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