

# Safety and health alert

## 07/99 Recreational diving accident - guided dive

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### Incident

On 27 December 1998, a tourist of non-English speaking background was diving from a commercial dive vessel anchored off Little Armstrong Bay via Rottnest Island. The diver was with four others under the guidance of a divemaster.

The divemaster and the diver ascended gradually to the surface when the diver's air supply was about 40 bar. The remainder of the group stayed at the bottom of the ocean, because the divemaster had not signalled for them to follow. When the divemaster found that the group was not swimming behind him, he returned to the group and allowed the diver to ascend alone to the surface.

After ascending to the surface, the divemaster instructed the remainder of the group to return to the vessel, before searching unsuccessfully for the missing diver. There was a fresh sea breeze and moderate but choppy sea waves. The missing diver was later recovered by the vessel's tender, and died some days later.

### Factors

1. The deceased held an open water diving qualification but had not dived since obtaining the qualification 15 months previously. The original training course was carried out in a protected tropical lagoon, in completely different conditions to those experienced off Rottnest Island.
2. The group was not organised into buddy pairs and was not briefed on emergency procedures. The divers in the group had a limited understanding of English and did not understand the briefing provided in English.
3. The divemaster responsible for guiding the group did not brief the divers in their own language. The divemaster had limited English language skills and could not communicate easily with the other crew members.
4. The divemaster did not signal all of the divers in the group to ascend when the missing diver's air supply was below a safe level, which allowed the deceased to become separated during the ascent.
5. Due to a navigational error the group surfaced about 150 metres behind the dive vessel instead of closer to the vessel.
6. None of the divers signalled to the vessel that there was an emergency. In the absence of a distress signal the crew did not understand that there was an emergency.



## Recommendations

1. Commercial dive operations should be aware that they have a legal responsibility to ensure the safety and health of their customers is not adversely affected by their work activities.
2. All recreational divers, including those participating in guided dives, require dive safety briefings and diving buddies as part of a safe diving operation.
3. Divers with a non-English speaking background must be given either verbal or written instructions in a language that the divers can understand.
4. The divemaster responsible for surface supervision should ensure that all divers have been adequately briefed, including divers under the supervision of other dive professionals using the vessel.
5. In-water dive supervisors should carry audible and visual signalling devices, such as whistles and light sticks, as well as visual location devices for use in an emergency.
6. Crews of dive vessels must be trained in the company's emergency procedures and practice emergency response, to reduce response time. Permanent brain damage is likely after six minutes if the victim is not breathing.

## Further Information

Further information can be obtained from the WorkSafe internet site [www.worksafe.wa.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au), or by contacting customer service on 1300 307 877 or email: [safety@docep.wa.gov.au](mailto:safety@docep.wa.gov.au).

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