

Safety and health alert

28/00 Employee injured whilst scuba diving to retrieve rock lobster pot

Incident

A 23-year-old employee suffered life-threatening injuries when he carried out SCUBA diving to retrieve an entangled rock lobster pot. The employee suffered a cerebral arterial gas embolism when he accidentally ascended uncontrollably. The employee suffered immediate disorientation and some pain but after a short rest continued work for approximately two hours.

Upon completing work the employee slept for a while at home, until about 5 hours after the accident had occurred, when he awoke with severe pain in his chest, joints, eyes and ears. He was conveyed by ambulance to the Fremantle hyperbaric chamber and was treated there over two days. Doctors stated that the employee was fortunate not to die at the time of the accident and that possibly his youth and level of fitness were factors assisting in his survival.

Factors

- There were no set procedures in place to determine who should carry out the dive and whether they were qualified and sufficiently trained to carry it out safely.
- The employee had not been trained in SCUBA diving.
- The employee was inadequately equipped to dive in that no weight belt was used to control his buoyancy thus allowing an uncontrolled ascent.
- Nobody on board the vessel had been trained in diving first aid resulting in failure to recognise the seriousness of the accident.

Recommendations

1. Safe work procedures are in place for pot retrieval and associated occupational diving activity.
2. Such procedures should ensure that divers are medically certified as fit to dive and be qualified to use SCUBA equipment. They should also ensure that persons diving in pot retrieval activities are trained in the hazards and nature of that work.
3. Emergency procedures including a standby emergency diver and person trained in diving first aid should always be present during diving operations.
4. Appropriate diving equipment, including that which assists in emergency rescue and treatment, is safely stored on board the vessel and free from contamination.

Further Information

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

