

Occupational Health and Safety: Part 1

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This series was introduced by an article that appeared in the third quarter issue of Sources. We continue now with the first of this series of five safety-related articles. — Editor

So you have a nice job, and somebody in your company is looking after your safety and health in the workplace. You have a pension plan, medical aid, and you are one of the privileged 2 percent of the world's population that can enjoy a hobby we call diving. You look forward to the day that you can retire and do what you always wanted to do — just relax, travel the world and dive! And when we do go diving, we just think of the sea, sun, sand, and lazy days underneath the palm trees while enjoying a nice cold cocktail in the swimming pool. We often think about relaxing, doing nothing, and getting waited on by waiters, dive-boat crew members, and everybody else while we get ready for the next dive.

But do we ever spare a thought for the diving crew members who are preparing the next dive for you, and the occupational hazards and risks they have to face on a daily basis to satisfy your whims?

On a recent dive trip to Bali, the diving equipment was carried by a small, skinny woman. In Bali, it is the duty of the women to carry the diving equipment, and they take exception if you offer to take the load off their shoulders. In addition, at one dive site, the porters transporting the cylinders to and from the dive site were doing this on small 100cc scooters, taking five to six cylinders in one go. These are transported over a rocky terrain. Imagine the damage if the driver had taken a fall from the scooter. Imagine the injuries from the fall itself, compounded by the cylinders falling on him and causing even more harm. Heaven forbid that a cylinder should hit a rock, bounce crazily and hit a bystander. The irony is that everybody was looking at all this and seeing it as a joke, taking pictures and laughing at the process.

But what is the real, long-term effect of this on these people? Will they suffer from back problems as they grow

older? What and who will be looking after their health when they can no longer do the work and have to sit at home? Will they be able to still walk about or run around with their grandchildren? Will they have access to any medical facilities, or even be able to afford these facilities?

Medical facilities in Bali are extremely limited, basic and often remote. While we were having lunch along a roadside, two men on a scooter had an accident, and one suffered a long, gruesome cut on his leg. The local bystanders simply took off the man's shirt and made a rudimentary bandage to stop the blood flow, loaded him onto the back of a pickup truck, and proceeded to drive him to the nearest medical facility. When we asked where the closest medical facilities were, people answered, "About three hours' drive away." They were not sure if he would even make it to the facilities alive.

With all that in mind, do we ever consider the health effects our diving pleasures cause to those supporting our pleasure? Let's look at some scenarios:

- Not all countries have stringent laws on compressed air cylinders in terms of inspections and tests. People there have to handle possibly unsafe cylinders and fill them. What would happen if a cylinder exploded due to structure failure?
- Picking up cylinders without following proper safe-lifting procedures could cause long-term back problems, and possibly leave older people incapacitated and full of pain.
- Rinsing equipment and dealing with water throughout the day, without proper skin care, could cause skin damage.
- In handling motors on boats, often these motors are neglected and not properly maintained, leading to exhaust smoke and carbon monoxide inhalation. In some cases, operators take off the motors every night and put them back on the boats in the morning — a task they do on their own, without support from others, and another probable cause of back injuries.
- Often these people are on site very early in the morning and have to stay on long after the last customer is gone, leading to fatigue and wearing out. They then go home to a bare house with the absolute minimum of accommodations and often have to sleep on the floor. The next morning, they are back, smiling at us, the paying customer.



For some people, balancing a large load on the head might be the natural way to carry it; for most of us, not so.

- They face angry and irritated customers who, most of the time, are in the wrong, and they have to just keep smiling and being pleasant because "the customer is always right." This could lead to tension buildup if it is not dealt with properly. Often they never have leave because if they do not work for a day, then they have no income.

The list goes on and on. For the remainder of this series, I will always try to bring the realities closer to home by referring to dive-related scenarios.