

PROBLEMS WITH MEDICALS STEER CLUBS TOWARDS SELF-ASSESSMENT

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Key Words

Diving medicals, questionnaire

The present system of diving club medicals by which members have to be examined by a GP or listed diving medical referee before being certified to dive and re-examined at intervals, could be dropped in favour of a self-assessment scheme, if a proposal put forward by diving doctors is accepted. The move will, doctors argue, provide a more efficient examination service. It would also save divers the cost of examination until a specific area of concern arises.

Divers would fill in a revised UK Sport Diving Medical Form containing a questionnaire specifically designed to establish the existence of any symptoms that could indicate conditions affecting fitness to dive. Positive answers would lead to contacting one of a list of recommended diving medical referees (100 or so doctors around the country, with knowledge of diving physiology and medicine) for consultation or referral to a specialist. In determining whether physiological problems exist, the medical questionnaire asks, among other things whether members have suffered from high blood pressure, angina, chest pains or palpitations, blackouts, fainting or dizziness, collapsed lung or pneumothorax, lung disease, asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, headaches, nervous system ailments including strokes and multiple sclerosis, back or spinal surgery, alcohol or drug abuse and current medication, including the contraceptive pill.

The system has been devised by the nine doctors who make up the UK Sport Diving Medical Committee (SDMC). Information packs have been sent to branches of the British Sub-Aqua Club, Sub-Aqua Association and Scottish Sub-Aqua Club, all of which would adopt the scheme. As *DIVER* went to press, responses to the proposal were being invited.

Results of opinions will be released in early May and, if the scheme proves popular, its acceptance by the clubs would be imminent. It would also be made available to divers who do not belong to any organisation. The move would bring clubs closer to PADI, which provides divers with a Recreational Scuba Training Council Medical Form containing a questionnaire. Any affirmative replies mean that the client needs to obtain medical clearance for diving.

The club scheme is based on a broad study by Dr Stephen Glen, a member of the UK SDMC. Working with colleagues at Edinburgh University, Dr Glen examined records of the existing system alongside a pilot study of the proposed system. with the help of around 3,000 members

of the SSAC. They concluded that the questionnaire part of the proposed form was "the most useful way of screening members to see if further assessment was required. The routine medical examination added little and SSAC members, whose answers to the questionnaire identified problems, could then be seen by diving doctors, and benefit from more appropriate assessment including specialist investigation if required."

Charges for consultations might be as high as, or higher than, those charged by GPs but the level of medical assessment would be advanced, and charges would accrue only when there was a specific malady to investigate.

UK SDMC member Dr Chris Edge, who also advises the BSAC on medical matters, expects the new system to be more popular than the old. "GPs are not as well equipped to recognise problem areas as doctors with knowledge of diving physiology," he told *DIVER*. "And on top of the questionable effect of GP examinations, it was known that many divers balked at the varying and sometimes high charges, £60-odd, levied by GPs for their services. A lackadaisical approach by some GPs was also a factor in the move for change. We have evidence of cases where certification of medical fitness to dive was granted to people with asthma, and others with diabetes, possibly because the doctor had simply not read the guidance notes properly. We decided that enough was enough."

Divers who have previously suffered from decompression illness will be passed as fit to dive as long as, when they complete the new questionnaire, they include a copy of a previous Certificate of Fitness to Dive issued by a medical referee following a DCI incident.

Divers would be required to fill out a UK Sport Diver Medical Form annually, on club renewal. Signed forms returned without ticks in any of the questionnaire boxes will result in a Certificate of Fitness to Dive, or the continuing validity of a certificate already held. Any temptation to conceal ailments would be tempered by the standing of the signed form as a legally binding document which, later, could invalidate insurance policies, club schemes or personal, if irregularities came to light.

Information on the proposed revised UK Sport Diving Medical Form is available on the UK Sport Diving Medical Committee's website <www.uksdmc.co.uk>.

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