REFERENCES


Long-term health consequences of diving accidents

An epidemiologic study which can tie together data on military diver health-performance history with information on previous or subsequent diving-related accidents (e.g., 1, 2) has potential value in assessing the adequacy of physical standards for diving as well as measures for preventing such accidents from occurring in the first place.

A recent report in Undersea Biomedical Research (3) addresses the hypothesis that there may be a relationship between a case of decompression sickness (DCS) in a U.S. Navy diver and subsequent hospitalization or medical board (medical-administrative evaluation for continuance on active duty) for whatever reason and perhaps many years later. The retrospective cohort study design (following a group of persons from a documented point of time in the past until a later event or outcome) that was used is a valuable epidemiologic method. However, important questions are still left unanswered in this report.

Many factors not examined and unrelated to diving may have independently affected the probability of the hospitalization or medical board occurring in the intervening years since DCS. These include total years and types of Navy diving done; history of recreational diving; overall health status, as perhaps measured by periodic multiphasic testing; patterns of physical exercise and cardiopulmonary fitness; sick call utilization behavior and for what illnesses; smoking and alcohol consumption; sociologic factors, e.g., divorce, death in the family; and degree of risk-taking behavior in general.

Additionally, after DCS occurred, other types of Navy duties could have provided different worksite exposures—physical exertion, liquid or gaseous chemicals, psychologic stresses—and, again, could have independently caused the hospitalizable illness or medical board.

Examination of these data, if they are available to the author, could lend more credence to the reported results and hypothesized association between DCS and later health risks.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REFERENCES