

SPUMS ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE 1987

RECREATIONAL DIVING STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIA A MOVE TOWARDS STANDARDISATION

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The development of the underwater breathing apparatus opened up the underwater world to the masses. It suddenly took what had been the domain of the professional hard-hat diver and gave it at minimal cost to a large number of people.

I am sure there are people here today who can remember those intrepid adventurers of the late 40's and early 50's who made their own masks from inner tube rubber and plate glass, and clad in bathers and an old jumper for warmth and armed with a five foot long home-made speargun, entered the waters around our coastline.

When the first scuba gear appeared on the market, these spearos changed from breath-hold to compressed air divers and our sport was born. At that stage, little was known of the effects of breathing compressed air and inevitably accidents occurred. There was no formal training as such and the need for adequately trained instructors became apparent. One of the first national bodies to get themselves organised and create some form of progressive training standard, and standards of the day in most British Commonwealth Countries, including Australia, was the British Sub-Aqua Club.

In Australia, the Australian Underwater Federation emerged as the body which represented the sport of skindiving and the growing offshoot of scuba-diving. At that time, the various clubs around Australia joined together to create the Federation which controlled the skindiving competitions and set the sporting rules and standards. The AUF produced a set of diving standards, initially based on the BSAC standards, but modified to suit the unique needs of the Australian diver. Our long, sparsely populated coastline dictated that our divers needed to be self-sufficient in areas such as accident management, boat diving, dive planning, etc. Thus our standards placed greater emphasis on some aspects of training than the BSAC, but we still retained the club orientated system of scuba instruction.

These standards have been modified over the years based on experience, reports on common accidents as revealed by Project Stickybeak and on the changes in equipment. Overall however, these standards have produced safe competent divers capable of diving with a buddy to depths of 20-30 metres.

In the UK, it is relatively easy for the BSAC clubs to maintain an even standard of club instruction as visiting examiners from other clubs located in nearby cities ensure standards are kept. In Australia however, the large distances

between cities and thus clubs, proved impossible to fund such visiting examiners and inconsistent standards of divers resulted. We therefore had the standard, which by that time had been accepted by the World Underwater Federation (CMAS), but not real way of ensuring that it was maintained at an even level around Australia.

By the early 1970's, the number of people being attracted to scuba diving reached a level where specialised diving instruction on a commercial basis became economically viable. Shops specialising in the sale of scuba equipment emerged, and the owners set up their own instructor course based on the owner's knowledge and what was known at the time.

There were sufficient of these owners and instructors who had trained through the AUF to create an Australia-wide instructor body. Thus, the Federation of Australian Underwater Instructors (FAUI) was born and an agreement which suited both organisations at the time was signed. FAUI agreed to use the AUF scuba diving standards if the AUF agreed to stop club instruction. Hence we obtained professional diving instruction and were better able to maintain a standard, issue international diving certification, and ensure safe diving in Australia.

Like all monopolies, we became a little complacent, and in the late 1970's the two American instructor organisations, Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) and National Association of Diving Instructors (NAUI) entered the field and began to make inroads into the diving scene.

Both of these instructor bodies have the backing of their parent organisation and have standards based on an entirely different philosophy. Whereas the BSAC originated AUF/FAUI standards tended to be conservative and attempt to fully train a diver in all aspects before granting him/her a certificate to dive, the American courses were based on progressive teaching using individual course packages, that is, one could become a scuba diver without being taught rescues or even have dived in the sea. The courses were designed in America to suit American conditions and were well presented, easy to sell and generally less expensive than the home-grown courses.

Thus the AUF/FAUI partnership began to feel the strain as the conservative safety-first AUF resisted change while the FAUI shop owner felt the need to become competitive with PADI and NAUI.

In the early 1980's, the Australian Coaching Council approached the AUF to produce a set of diving standards which would be recognised under the National Coaching Accreditation Scheme (NCAS). Naturally we used as a basis our standards which had been designed around the need of Australian divers. As FAUI instructors taught to

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these standards, all were able to become a National Accredited Coach and other instructors who were able to demonstrate that they had similar qualifications were also accepted.

However, our methods of teaching and examination differed from those of both PADI and NAUI, and neither organisation were able to change or amend their system to accomplish certification to the NCAS. As schools and other government institutions began to refuse any instructor who had not an NCAS qualification, a long series of political arguments commenced which unfortunately is still going on.

In 1985, FAUI, feeling the need for independence, broke away from the AUF, but its standards are still such that their instructors can become registered under the NCAS should FAUI choose to apply for this. NAUI in the meantime had gained a level of independence from their parent organisation and had reached an agreement with the AUF to teach an additional package at their instructor qualification courses and thereby also gain NCAS certification. We had thus gained standardisation to some extent, although PADI, by now the largest of the instructor bodies, were still not eligible.

In 1984, the Standards Association of Australia released a draft standard for the working diver. This standard, called "Training and Certification of Divers" was supposedly for professional working divers only, in fact it included a disclaimer that it was not meant for recreational divers. The draft was in four parts and was based around a similar standard in force in the UK for the teaching of North Sea Divers. The parts were: 1. Air Divers, 2. Restricted Commercial Air Divers, 3. Commercial Air Diving with Surface Compression Facilities; and 4. Bell Diving. However, the first part, ie. for air divers, appeared to contain glaring discrepancies between what level of competency was sought and the actual subjects to be taught. By its very title, the AUF became alarmed that we would be getting a pseudo new set of standards on which some uninformed coroner would base a finding, regardless of the disclaimer in the standard.

Accordingly, we presented the SAA with an 18 page series of comments on the inadequacy of the standard and proposed, as a counter, that the NCAS standards be used as a start point on which to base Part 1. After all, the professional diving student needs to be taught to scuba dive first of all just like any other diver. As a result of our submission, and many others from equally concerned organisations, the SAA produced Parts 2, 3, and 4 of the SAA Standard AS2815 and kept Part 1 for further consideration.

I was then involved in negotiations with the SAA which finally resulted in the SAA Committee forming a separate

sub-committee to investigate the feasibility of producing Part 1 as a standard for recreational and professional air divers, ie. the first section of the standard will adequately train air divers while the second will continue with the training to produce a professional air diver who can then progress through Parts 2, 3, and 4 to finally become a lock out diver.

The initial meeting of this sub-committee was in Townsville on 18-19 June 1986 and in those two days almost accomplished what we have been trying to achieve for 10 years.

All concerned bodies sat down, and using the AUF Philosophy Paper which had been produced to show the reasons for our standards, we were able to almost reach a consensus. Naturally, there were disagreements, but in many cases after discussion, we were able to reach an agreed standard or test which although different to what we were used to, had the same long term effect.

During this meeting, and of interest to this audience, Dr Ian Millar, representing the Australian Medical Association, (no SPUMS representative was on this sub-committee by the way) had a very instructive discussion with the sub-committee on the requirements of the medical examination for the standards.

In Sydney on 12 and 13 February 1987, the sub-committee met again and reviewed our original findings. There still were some disagreements and we agreed at that stage to disagree but to present our findings to the parent committee for approval to send out for public scrutiny. Ian Millar by then had produced his draft medical tests and a very lively discussion took place, mainly based around trying to find a fool-proof way of getting the medical result to the diving instructor quickly without breaking doctor/ patient confidentiality.

I have just been informed that the sub-committee will be presenting its findings to the parent committee in Melbourne on 1 July 1987. I expect that the draft should be circulated for comment by the end of the year. Areas which are in disagreement are:

- The distance specified for the snorkel swim while wearing scuba and if a diver should demonstrate his fitness during the swim by being neutrally buoyant or be allowed to use his buoyancy vest.
- The minimum total bottom time required by the trainee prior to certification. The current suggestion is 140 minutes although the AUF would like 4 hours and others would wish this to be reduced to as low as 80 minutes including assessment time. (If anyone has any information on the period of learning a new skill until it becomes second nature, I would be pleased to be informed of it).

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- The instructor/student ratio is another problem.
- The standard of the scuba rescue test.

I would urge you, as the people who will be involved in the medical tests and the unfortunate results if we make mistakes with these standards, to examine the standards when they appear with a critical eye to the safety of the student.

Once circulated for public comment, the sub-committee will need to re-convene to examine the results and make the necessary adjustments. The second draft will then be re-circulated for public opinion by which time hopefully, a full consensus will be reached and the standard produced.

Let me state now that in many of these tests the standards of the four organisations are at a much higher level and in other cases equal. Each instructor organisation intends to continue to teach to their own standards. The Australian Standard will merely state the minimum levels which can be taught. Once the standards are released, it will be up to state legislation to legalise its use.

Perhaps then, we will have achieved our goal of a set of safe standards for the Australian Scuba Diver.

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MINUTES OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 2 MARCH 1987

AT THE HOTEL HILTON INTERNATIONAL,
SYDNEY

PRESENT

Dr C Acott, Dr C Lourey, Dr D Davies, Dr G Barry, Dr D Walker, Dr A Sutherland, Dr J Knight, Dr P McCartney, Dr L Greenbaum (Executive Secretary of the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society), Dr M Fraundorfer.

1. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING:

The minutes of the two previous meetings were circulated and confirmed.

2. BUSINESS ARISING:

2.1 Dr Shields has not yet been in contact with the Society. Dr Lourey will undertake to contact him and

possibly arrange additional speaking dates around Australia.

2.2 Rockdive. A successful meeting was held in Rockhampton with over 80 delegates. Arrangements for a similar meeting to be held in other states have not come to fruition. The President will investigate some possibilities.

3. NEW BUSINESS

3.1 Annual General Meeting 1988. This being the Centenary year, the Committee agreed that the meeting should be held in Australia. The President will study options available along the Queensland Coast.

3.2 List of Doctors trained in Underwater Medicine.

3.2.1 It was noted that no New Zealanders were on the list. This is because none of the eligible doctors has contacted the Secretary.

3.2.2 The New Zealand Chapter of SPUMS is compiling its own list of doctors with appropriate training.

3.2.3 Applications for listing have been made by doctors who have completed the WA Course. The course was discussed. Dr Tim Anderson, Officer in Charge of the School of Underwater Medicine, has been approached and the Committee agreed, on his advice, that the WA Course was equivalent to the Basic Course run by the RAN School of Underwater Medicine.

3.3 Bulk Billing for Diving Medicals. This was again discussed at length. It was reiterated that such examinations cannot be claimed from Medicare.

3.4 Journal Equipment. Dr Knight requested that the Society purchase some ancillary equipment for his Macintosh Computer so that all the layout and type setting of the Journal could be done more efficiently. On the last Journal he spent over 23 hours cutting and pasting. The Committee agreed that the equipment should be purchased.

3.5 Diving Medical Courses. It was brought to the Committee's notice that courses in "Diving Medicine" are being run by people with no qualifications or recognised training in Diving Medicine. The Committee felt that such courses should not be supported.

NEXT MEETING:

To be held in conjunction with the AGM in Honiara, June 1987.