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Introduction

In March 2011 there was a Disabled Sports Festival in Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman, organized by the Ministry of Sports Affairs. These sports events are organized since three years to support and inspire the handicapped community in the country. 550 active participants with all kinds of disabilities (blind, deaf, mentally retarded, Down syndrome, paraplegics bound to wheelchair) took part in a variety of sports disciplines – running, discus, long jump, football, basketball, and also swimming and SCUBA diving. To ensure safety of the diving programme 'Oman Dive Challenge' international handicapped diving associations and diving physicians were invited to support with their experience and standard procedures. Since 2009 'Oman Dive Challenges' are performed as introduction to SCUBA diving for disabled during sports festivals.



← Checking fitness-to-dive near the pool
Important material: webbed gloves and knee protectors →



Material

A medical examination form was sent to participants before the event. They should bring it filled-out by their family doctor. Ambulance car, oxygen, and first aid kit were prepared on-site by the diving physician. Hospital and Hyperbaric Unit were informed and emergency lines were checked. Diving equipment with special needs for handicapped (knee protectors, swimming gloves, small weights) was prepared by instructors and surface assistants.

Supporting Staff consisted of: 3 handicapped diving instructors, 1 assistant instructor, 1 surface assistant, 1 diving physician, and supervision by 1 team coordinator. Dive-site (hotel swimming pool, depth: 1.0 – 3.0 m) was prepared for requirements of handicapped persons in cooperation with hotel management. Medical check-ups were done pre-dive by diving physician near the pool. For emergency assistance in case of any medical problem the diving doctor was present during all diving activities.

Results

38 medical check-ups were performed: 28 for disabled persons, 10 for their personal assistants (teacher, therapist). As a result 30 off these were fit to dive, 8 were fit to snorkel (reasons: lung diseases, ear problems). Coloured armbands given by the doctor indicated how many dive buddies were needed (in-water and surface), and whether participants were able to dive or only to snorkel.

The number of needed assistants (in-water + surface) was decided in accordance with 'Checklist fitness to dive' recommendations for disabled.

During the 4 day event 38 divers had been in the pool with assistance of the staff. Among these were 8 blind, 8 mentally retarded, and 12 persons bound to wheelchair (after car accident, polio, or birth complications). 58 dives were performed (8 snorkel dives, 50 SCUBA dives), 20 disabled wanted and did more than one dive.

Among SCUBA divers only one paraplegic person had a temporary problem: after entering the pool when floating in diving gear breathing through the regulator he felt uncomfortable. This was not only because of unusual breathing conditions but also because of unstable position. His 2nd attempt on the following day was successful. Among snorkel divers the staff was not able to teach three mentally retarded persons to seal the snorkel with their lips.



← 3 blue arm bands
for a paraplegic
diver
(need of 2
instructors + 1
surface assistant)

Happy novice diver
with team
coordinator →



← Guiding a blind person
to his first dive

In-water assistance	1 instructor	2 instructors	2 instr. + 1 surface
medically fit to snorkel	4 disabled 1 attendant	2 disabled -	- -
medically fit to dive	2 disabled 6 attendants	13 disabled -	10 disabled -

* nobody was totally unfit to dive or snorkel

Conclusion

Disabled persons also have the desire to master the enjoyable and complex skill of diving. These introductory dives are a successful experience if there is a safe surrounding (pool-conditions, a location adapted to the needs of the disabled), staff with special qualification and experience in handicapped diving, and organisation according to safety standards and medical emergency procedures. Pleasure of weightlessness and freedom is evident and brings additional motivation in the whole process of rehabilitation.

Literature

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