

A Life-Saving Solution

YMCA of Greater Omaha in Omaha, Neb.

Dawn Klingensmith

A single lifeguard was on duty at a YMCA pool in Omaha, Neb., when a 45-year-old lap swimmer named Daniel lost consciousness and sank beneath the surface on the shallow end. Kenneth Proctor was able to respond in a way that not all solo lifeguards can do—at least not yet.

He relied on the aid of a turtle.

A Safety Turtle, that is.

Proctor was able to plunge in immediately because his rescue buoy was equipped with a wireless alarm that instantly detects immersion in water, and then transmits a signal that sets off an alarm at one or more base stations in the facility, signaling staff to call 911.

The quarter-size Safety Turtle allows a single lifeguard to respond immediately to an aquatic emergency, rather than having to hustle across the deck to the emergency call button before attending to the distressed swimmer.

"The Turtle factors greatly into a one-guard situation, where help is needed to provide aid, call 911, handle crowd control, et cetera," said Linda Butkus, vice president of operations and COO, YMCA of Greater Omaha. Instead of wasting valuable seconds summoning help, "Ken focused 100 percent on the situation at hand."



As Daniel gasped for air, Proctor noticed a scar on his chest—evidence of previous heart problems. Accordingly, Proctor administered emergency care until an ambulance arrived less than five minutes later. In subsequent news reports of the August 2008 rescue, the former Navy Air rescue swimmer (now the downtown Y's aquatics director) credited the Turtle for the speedy response time.

The day after the incident, Butkus wrote to the Safety Turtle's manufacturer, Ottawa-based Terrapin Communications. The Turtle "allowed our guard to be first responder in a lone guard situation and gave him the ability to give 100 percent of his attention to the victim and have the comfort (and confidence) that help was on the way," Butkus wrote. "It helped us save a life."

Needless to say, "Daniel's family was most grateful, as was his employer," Butkus said. "As soon as he was well enough, he came back and thanked the staff."

When two lifeguards are on duty, one can jump in the water while the other goes to set off the alarm. But the downtown YMCA in Omaha often has only one guard on duty due to low-volume periods throughout the day. So, as an added safety measure, the YMCA

of Greater Omaha in 2007 purchased Safety Turtles for each of its nine pools. "Numerous YMCA associations comprising several hundred branches across the U.S.A. are using the Turtle," said Bob Lyons, president, Terrapin Communications. "Though separately operated and funded, the U.S. YMCA associations share a common insurance underwriter," and the company strongly recommends using the Turtle or a Turtle-like device.

So perhaps there will come a day when virtually all lifeguards, working solo or not, will be equipped with immersion alarms. The YMCA might simply be ahead of the curve.

By comparison, think back about a decade ago, when automatic external defibrillators first started to appear in recreation centers. Now, AEDs—which administer shocks when people go into cardiac arrest—are standard safety equipment, not just for recreation facilities but also workplaces and public gathering spaces like movie theaters.

The YMCA of Greater Omaha has had AEDs at its facilities for quite some time, and on at least one occasion, an AED literally brought someone back from the dead.

In December 2008, four months after Daniel's rescue, an AED—in conjunction with CPR—brought back a man in his 60s who had a heart attack and collapsed on the racquetball court. His partner couldn't find a pulse. The patient's son started CPR, and an AED was rushed to the scene.

The first few minutes of a cardiac arrest are the most critical. The patient was already shocked and breathing when emergency medical workers arrived from their station, just one or two minutes away.

Knowing an untimely death had been averted, "When they began working on him, a fireman said, 'Welcome back,'" Butkus said.

Like the AED, Turtle-like immersion alarms might become standard safety equipment at aquatics facilities. But that day has yet to come.

"I believe people are becoming more and more aware," Butkus said.

News coverage of Daniel's rescue "sparked interest," she added. YMCAs in the neighboring state of Iowa contacted her to learn about the Turtle and similar products on the market. And CNN featured the Turtle in a segment on pool safety.

However, "There would be a lot of red tape to get through to make it a standard pool regulation. Right now, its use is being driven by insurance companies," Butkus said.

Currently, the Turtle is considered a discretionary expense, Lyons added.

"For the broader public pool market, we're probably three to five years away from any tipping point," he said. "The YMCA example is slowly spreading, but a lot more publicizing is required, including with the public pool insurance underwriters. Tight money is severely limiting discretionary spending."

It might take an accident or a close call for aquatics directors to see immersion alarms as must-have safety equipment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

YMCA of Greater Omaha: www.metroymca.org

Safety Turtle/Terrapin Communications Inc.:
www.safetyturtle.com

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