

## **A boarding supervisor's worst fear: a student in your care is seriously injured or killed.**

To be forewarned is to be forearmed: *"The study of fatal incidents remains essential to fatality prevention"* (Andrew Brookes, researcher). Often the most risky environment for teenage students is the great outdoors, when away from regular routines



and outside our comfort zone. While there is little research on fatal accidents specifically in the student boarding industry, there are coroners' reports from individual incidents and also some very helpful research in the area of outdoor recreation. The outdoor recreation researcher Andrew Brookes studies 146 fatalities over the past fifty years, in a series of five papers (reference: [www.freepatentsonline.com/.../Australian Journal Outdoor Education/267429089.html](http://www.freepatentsonline.com/.../Australian%20Journal%20Outdoor%20Education/267429089.html)).

Boarding professionals can read his reports and be forewarned and forearmed by his findings. Likewise newspaper and coroners' reports from other student fatalities can inform boarding practice and ensure that we learn from these tragic events, to make our boarding programs even safer for young people.

**Outdoor Education Fatalities in Australia** – (from Brookes' research, to 2010)

Drowning	49
Vehicle accidents	35

Falling trees	14
Falling rocks and sand	14
Falls from height	12
Hypothermia	6
Skiing accidents	4
Lightning strike	4
Asthma	2
Allergic reaction	2
Fire	2
Murder	2
Shark attack	1
Fall from horse	1

These statistics (not claimed to be a totally comprehensive list), include staff members and other persons who were not a part of the excursion but were involved in the incident. *“The supervision of teenagers in outdoor environments can be a hazardous undertaking.” (Andrew Brookes)*

The aim of Brookes’ research into these 146 fatalities in the Australian outdoor education and school excursions arena is to ensure that “lessons learned from particular incidents are recorded and accessible” so we can “identify ways to prevent future fatalities by studying fatal incidents.”

### **Several extremely important precautionary recommendations**

come from Brookes’ research;

- the importance of very tight supervision of teens in hazardous conditions, as they (particularly boys) can tend to take risks that adults



- would not, most specifically around steep drops and moving water
- the importance of planning how to coordinate an emergency response, including being able to detail your exact location and how it can be accessed by paramedic assistance
  - the need for supervisors to understand and be prepared for severe allergic reactions. The timely use of an Epipen can save a student's life.
  - to view large-scale visits to pools or other swimming locations with considerable caution (particularly 'end of the year' celebrations)
  - to be aware that outdoor activities might offer particular opportunities for bullying or worse, as "these particular behaviours tend to occur when the attention of supervisors is otherwise engaged, even if momentarily".
  - to pay attention to the weather. One of Brookes' conclusions is that environmental factors (including weather) can be a larger risk factor of more significance in the fatality than actual activity skill, (except in downhill skiing). Of the events of death by falling tree or tree branch, almost half were during or soon after severe weather. Other weather related deaths were due to lightning strike, hypothermia and drowning during surf life-saving events held during severe weather.

## **Warnings from current news coverage**

### **1. Student death promptly calls for better camp safety**

**Currently in the news** is a coroner's report on a student drowning in 2010. The student drowned while swimming with other students in a 'murky' dam, on a school camp. The school had been taking students to this location for many years without any serious incidents. The coroner's findings highlighted these issues;

1. Schools and boarding residences need to carry out swimming assessments on any students likely to be involved in water activities.

Any staff members who are supervising water activities need to be familiar with the all students' swimming capabilities.

2. Staff should have swimming / life saving qualifications and be trained to identify situations where a swimmer is in distress.
3. Staff should have flotation devices at swimming activities.
4. Staff should do a risk assessment for all swimming activities and be familiar with emergency procedures.



## **2. Student allergies – two precautionary cases**

The coroner reporting (The Australian, June1, 2012) on the anaphylaxis death of a 13-year old boy in 2007 from eating a satay meal while on a school camp, found his prestigious Melbourne private school directly responsible for his death. She found they were ignorant of recently released guidelines on anaphylaxis and showed a lack of respect to people with dietary requirements, when they failed to exercise reasonable care and attention to the medical and food allergy information provided to them.

Another student death from a nut allergy in May 2011, (where one teacher tried to inject him with an EpiPen but was holding it upside down and accidentally injected it into his own thumb), has reportedly resulted in changes in NSW public schools procedures, including:

- training in anaphylaxis and emergency care for all staff,
- ensuring first aid kits are equipped with EpiPens, and
- a requirement that every public school run CPR courses on a regular basis.

The coroner stressed that the inquest was not looking to blame anyone for the student's death, rather, it was an inquiry into how he died and how a similar tragedy could be avoided.

Read more:

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/apology-for-students-nut-allergy-death-20121210-2b5oy.html#ixzz3JOjD4iir>



### 1. Outsourcing activities

**A \$300,000 fine for TAFE** Victoria for the death of a student, was also in the news this week. A school outsourced a horsemanship activity to TAFE Vic and the coroner found that TAFE Vic had failed in its duty of care.

Schools that use external providers to provide courses or activities need to be aware that the school is still ultimately responsible for the students and needs to make sure they are sending their students into a safe environment.

**The first step is always to conduct a thorough risk assessment.** This involves consulting with the external education provider and taking steps to ensure the students and the school will not be exposed to unnecessary risks. Examples of actions that a school may take include:

- ensuring there is clear and open communication between it and the external provider to create an effective and informed relationship for developing risk assessment and identifying appropriate control measures,
- checking that the external provider has well documented and implemented workplace safety procedures in place,

- checking that the provider has safety procedures in place, including adequate procedures for initial assessment of students, and supervision of students,
- checking the competency of the provider by checking references,
- discussing who is responsible for first aid and other emergency procedures, and
- checking the qualifications of the provider's staff.



## **2. Communication after a student fatality**

In 2010, a student was hit by a car as he crossed the road unsupervised to play sport on the school's sport ground. The parents were notified of the accident, but the father learned of his son's death from texts received from family and friends, as he was racing to the hospital. The school had posted an announcement of the student's death before the parents had been notified and before the student had been formally identified. While this is an extreme example, schools need to have very clear policies and procedures around communication after a death or major event. Staff must be aware of the policy and their role.

## **3. Monitor social media**

The death of a student is a most traumatic and painful event for family and friends and the last thing they need at this time is insensitive or hurtful comments made by students, staff or others.

**The WA news article "Social media suicide alert after death"** reports the Education Department advises teachers to search sites for inaccurate rumours and disrespectful comments. By monitoring and responding to social media, schools could also identify students who may need more



support, minimizing the risk of further suicides.

(<https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/lifestyle/a/24989308/social-media-suicide-alert-after-death/> article)

The NT news article **“Northern Territory teacher criticizes teen student after he committed suicide” March 25, 2014** is a shocking example of the need for this awareness.

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