

Preventing entrapment tragedies

By Steve Getzoff

Entrapment deaths or injuries in pools and hot tubs are always tragic events. In the past few months, we've seen the disembowelment of a six-year old girl in a public wading pool in Minnesota and the death of a six-year old boy in a residential pool in Connecticut. Pool and spa drain entrapment has now made its way onto the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's list of the top five household hazards.

Sensing a need to act, both houses of Congress are in the process of enacting pool and spa safety-related legislation that will impose certain safety regulations and offer incentives to states to strengthen existing legislation in connection with drowning as well as entrapment. APSP and the industry support these efforts and are committed to promoting the safe and sensible use of pools and hot tubs.

Very significantly, in 2006, ANSI/APSP-7 American National Standard for Suction Entrapment Avoidance in Swimming Pools, Wading Pools, Spas, Hot Tubs and Catch Basins was approved by ANSI. This standard addresses all forms of entrapment injury, including suction entrapment, body or limb entrapment, hair entanglement, and evisceration. The standard provides several forms of protection, including multiple or unblockable outlets, drain covers that conform to ASME/ANSI 119.12.8, reduced flow rate, and other devices such as an SVRS or a vent line. Available information strongly indicates that several provisions in the ANSI/APSP-7 standard were not followed in each of the above tragedies. In each instance, there was reportedly a single drain, a broken, missing and/or non-compliant cover, and, most likely, a flow rate that exceeded the new ANSI/APSP-7 standard.

Through the efforts of APSP the proposed federal legislation is consistent with the new ANSI standard.

Preventing further tragedies of this type is a major priority for the industry and particularly the service sector, which has the most frequent and direct contact with pool owners, many of whom may not be aware of the risk in the first place. Below are several steps service providers can take to help prevent entrapment injuries and to protect themselves from negligent owners.

1. If you see something, say something. The recent incidents in both Minnesota and Connecticut reportedly involved drain covers that were not in place. There is no such thing as a "back-up" for this condition and ANSI/APSP-7 insists that when a cover is missing or broken the pool or spa must not be used. While no one can force owners to close their pools, you should advise them accordingly, in the strongest of terms. Other potential hazards include single outlets without an SVRS, gravity system, vent line, or comparable device. Damaged pool covers, fences, latches or gates, non-functioning alarms and non-compliant slides or diving boards also represent potential hazards. While a pool service provider cannot generally inspect for all of the above, any visible hazard should be reported to the owner.

2. Know the Law. Beginning one year after passage of the federal legislation, all drain covers sold in the United States will have to comply with ASME/ANSI 119.12.8. The Senate bill also would require existing public pools to install outlet covers in compliance with this standard. The fact is, all pools and spas must have proper outlet covers in place. As the trusted pool professional, you should make your customers aware of this opportunity to further protect their families and guests.

The bills will provide incentives to states to adopt laws requiring that all new pools and spas be built with multiple outlets, unblockable outlets, or no outlets. Existing single outlet installations can also be retrofitted with multiple outlets or other devices that can help prevent certain forms of entrapment.

3. Put it in Writing. There is no safe way to operate or use a pool or spa that has a missing or broken outlet cover. These and other potentially non-compliant conditions should be brought to the attention of the owner. Regrettably, not every owner will follow your advice, and, in the event of a tragedy and resultant lawsuit, they may even deny the conversation. It is therefore important to follow up your advice in writing, by email, certified letter, or both. The writing should confirm the conversation, identify the hazard, suggest a course of action (even if it is to contact "your dealer"), and remind them that failure to take action may expose their family and guests to risk of severe injury.

Any writing or e-mail should be retained permanently with the customer file or records. This will place you in the best possible position and may also increase the likelihood that a reluctant owner might take appropriate action.

Steven Getzoff is a senior litigation partner with the law firm of Lester Schwab Katz and Dwyer in New York and specializes in product liability and business litigation. He has been representing members of the pool and hot tub industry in liability and other matters for over 20 years.

Originally published in APSP Quarterly (AQ), Winter 2007 Edition.