



Coronavirus controls for recreational scuba instruction

APSTO December 2021

Introduction

The COVID 19 lockdowns during 2020 have made 2021 a very important year for diving businesses to recover revenue, fulfil postponed demand for diver training and build resilience to face possible disruption in the future. During the period of covid controls and social distancing, many dive schools were diligent in implementing measures and this certainly helped diving recover.

Although formal covid control measures may have been removed, it is still possible to contract covid and suffer varying severity of infection. It is also possible to carry and spread covid after vaccination. The new omicron variant is now spreading, with headlines about rapid infection rates.

This creates a need for diving professionals to continue some precautions against covid infection among their teams or customers. Either could cause personal consequences or further disruption to businesses hoping to maximise the end of the 2021 dive season or the start of 2022.

Continuing to guard against covid impact during recreational diving instruction also helps representative bodies (such as APSTO) present an evidence-based case for diving to continue in any future waves, or periods of pandemic restriction. This case for exemption from closure is also strengthened by acknowledged mental health benefits, widespread vaccination and boosters, diving being a mainly outside activity and the now well documented absence of transmission in well run, covid-aware outdoor diving operations. APSTO is intending to present this case should lockdowns be discussed – backup in the form of visible good practice from dive schools will help greatly.

Previously APSTO has simply emphasised the clear-cut government advice. The situation is now different, with the clear advice having been replaced by individual responsibility for companies and individuals to choose their own covid controls.

Assessment of risks in diving operations, including surface infection risks, is the responsibility of each diving business. However, since the original lockdown, there are now more tools available for dive schools to use in their risk assessment, meaning that measures can be proportionate, targeted and responsive to changing circumstances.

APSTO has been discussing the usefulness of various measures to assist dive schools in formulating their own risk assessments and measures to ensure both staff and student safety, plus minimising impacts on diving businesses.

Available training

The TDI / SDI airborne infection course has been very useful – this and other agency equivalents can be strongly recommended for dive team members as solid foundational training.

Avoiding the 'ping'

The requirements for isolation after contact vary for different vaccination statuses, but having any team member removed affects diving operations. The WHO definition of close contact is within 2m for more than 15mins. Giving some thought to social distancing during an outside sport, or when giving close assistance with gear is very worthwhile. The experience of 'Track and Trace' calls is that questions relate mainly in indoor venues – outside or socially distant activities do not trigger a requirement to isolate.

Masks

Managing masks in a diving operation is very difficult. Frequent wearing and removal creates problems for educational clarity and risks actually spreading infection via surface contact. Maintaining some distancing instead of mask use is worth considering. Masks are currently not needed outside, but requirement for their use inside may increase.

Vaccination status and lateral flow testing

Dive schools cannot require divers to take tests, or reveal their vaccination status, but this information could make a big difference to the covid measures in a diving operation. A group of entirely double vaccinated, lateral flow tested divers is a very different risk to unvaccinated, untested divers. It seems reasonable to ask divers politely if they would be able to share this information (on a strictly confidential basis) with centre admin staff, who then determine any risk control measures. This information should NOT be recorded on diving paperwork, but could be added to medical forms by hand.

Many industries are now asking staff to undertake regular lateral flow testing. While this cannot be made compulsory, it is a very sensible measure for dive centres to ask their staff and students to undertake, to help with risk assessment.

Vaccine passports

These are in the latest round of measures, but are not yet mandatory for diving. Although no one is in a hurry to add more paperwork and barriers to diving education, they may prove a very useful and acceptable tool which students or divers might offer.

Building these measures together into a risk assessment remains the individual responsibility of dive schools to include, or ignore, any of the above. However, the responsibility for staff at work and duty of care towards paying customers, and the risks to recovering businesses from avoidable disruption should create a strong incentive to continue to engage with relevant covid measures.

Queries or feedback for APSTO can be directed via the relevant training agency. The intention is to keep up to date with most relevant practice for changing scenarios and support UK diving in remaining able to operate safely.