

## Just Add Water

By Maria Bella, MAFOIT

It's the hottest trend to hit the hospitality industry in decades: to increase heads in beds, just add an indoor waterpark to a hotel. It works so well that some chains have come up with their own formula to expedite the process. Holiday Inn has a system for hotel owners to follow that will help ease the burden of the average \$20 million price tag that accompanies an indoor resort waterpark. With all of the money flowing into these facilities and the rate at which they are being built (nearly 200 new resort waterparks are proposed or in progress for construction in the United States and Canada<sup>i</sup>) it's easy to understand why safety may be a secondary concern as players rush to get into the game and preserve their hard won market share of leisure and business travelers.

Standard swimming pools present many hazards, from drowning to disease transmission. The new design of resort waterparks raises the stakes by increasing the number of hazards in a given area and packing in patrons. Hotel employees generally aren't adequately trained to identify or handle life-threatening situations. At a resort waterpark, that task will fall to the lifeguards. The lifeguard industry has been facing a shortage of qualified candidates for years.<sup>ii</sup> Municipal pools have shortened hours and swimming beaches have shut down because there just aren't enough lifeguards to go around. Recently, the Department of Labor mandated that lifeguards under the age of 16 be restricted in the duties that they can perform at a waterpark.<sup>iii</sup> While they are allowed to guard slide catch pools, they are not allowed to be on the loading platform of elevated slides. This is one area in particular in which lack of proper supervision could cause loss of life.

Imagine the typical family on vacation. Mom and dad are in the pool with two kids and all is well. The children are never out of sight. Now imagine that same family vacation, except one parent is in a business meeting in one section of the hotel while the other parent takes the children to the resort's waterpark. Multiple slides dump out into an extensive catch pool. The single parent takes the children to the top of the slide loading platform. There's no attendant available to make sure the children enter the correct one of four slides. The parent tells the children to go down the red slide, then descends to the catch pool and waits for the children to arrive. The first child follows directions and goes down the red slide. The second child likes yellow better and goes down that slide instead. That slide dumps out 70 feet away into an unsupervised or inadequately guarded area of the pool. The consequences are grave.

Wave pools are a big draw for patrons and resort planners alike. There's plenty of shallow water, which the layperson interprets to mean less likelihood of drowning. Lifeguards who have rescued toddlers from eight-inch deep wading pools or adults from the three-foot area in swimming pools know that depth doesn't determine safety. Additionally, in a wave pool, the depth isn't constant. One moment, people are in waist deep water, the next moment the wave has dumped over their heads and driven them into other patrons or into the pavement. Body surfers at resort wave pools flaunt abrasions like badges of honor. Waves that are strong enough to carry a body surfer forward forty feet are strong enough to cause debilitating injuries when patrons slam into each other. Contusions, concussions, and compound fractures can be expected when unprepared people collide.

Another hazard of shallow water is neck and back injuries. As pools are renovated to cater to more patrons, the deep end is often made shallow so that people can spread out and keep their heads above water. Rather than eliminating the issue of overcrowding, additional shallow water encourages more people to cram into a pool. Some pools no longer have the depth necessary for safe head-first entry and those who attempt a shallow dive may hit another patron causing injury to more than just themselves.

Lots of people equal lots of germs and while swimming pools have long been thought of as safe due to the chlorine in the water, the Centers for Disease Control is doing their best to alert the public to the hazards of Recreational Water Illness (RWI) or disease transmission through swimming pools.<sup>iv</sup> There are some germs that chlorine can kill on contact. Other germs may take hours or even days to kill in a typical swimming pool. In 2005, a *Cryptosporidium* outbreak that occurred at a spray park in New York infected people from 26 states and two countries.<sup>v</sup> Ingesting pool water is the most common means of

transmission, however, there are germs that can be aerosolized and transmitted through the air, or cause infection by coming into contact with the skin.

Many pools are now monitored by sophisticated machinery that tests the water every few seconds and adjusts the chlorine or pH level.<sup>vi</sup> While this reduces the chance of human error, a human is still responsible for filling chemical vats and making sure that the machines are maintained. This may fall to onsite staff or an outside contractor. When maintaining pool equipment and chemicals are the responsibility of the hotel maintenance staff, additional training is needed to make sure that each task is properly and safely performed.<sup>vii</sup> A basic error of adding the wrong liquid to a container can have devastating results. Every year, pool operators and chemical distributors around the country unintentionally mix chlorine and acid and create mustard gas. This potential for harm has led many hotel owners and management companies to seek outside help in operating their facilities. Unfortunately, some outside contractors may be novices, too. The ability to pass a written test may not equate to the wherewithal to put that knowledge to use in a pool environment.

Even common slips and falls can be more likely at resort waterparks. Algae can build up in areas of standing water. It may go unnoticed by staff and guests alike until someone slips on it and ends up injured.<sup>viii</sup>

Pool staffs are tasked with the double duty of protecting and pleasing patrons. Giving away free room nights to unhappy hotel guests flies in the face of the increased revenue that a resort waterpark is supposed to produce. Lifeguards who are used to relying on their whistles to grab the attention of the crowd and single out rule breakers at municipal pools may be restricted in the use of this tool at resort waterparks. Likewise the facility may serve alcohol to guests at poolside increasing the chance of unruly and dangerous behavior.

All of these issues add up to increased potential for harm. In an industry with a shortage of qualified employees, complex chemical matters, and plenty of virgin territory, unless they pay meticulous attention to the risks, resort waterpark owners could soon be swimming in a sea of litigation.

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<sup>i</sup> Sangree, David J. "Indoor Waterpark Resort Numbers Increase in '06." *Hotel Online, Special Report*. August 2006. Available from [http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006\\_3rd/Aug06\\_WaterparkReport.html](http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006_3rd/Aug06_WaterparkReport.html). Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Kriner, Stephanie. "Nation Sweats Lifeguard Shortage." *In The News, American Red Cross*. 18 May 2001. <http://www.redcross.org/news/hs/aquatics/010517lgshortage.html>. Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. *Fact Sheet #60*. "Application of the Federal Youth Employment Provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to the Employment of Lifeguards." January 2006. Available from <http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/whd/whdfs60.htm>. Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Six "PLEAs" For Healthy Swimming: Protection Against Recreational Water Illnesses (RWIs)*. 28 June 2006. Available from [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/6\\_pleas.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/6_pleas.htm). Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Sacket, D and Lachocki, T. "Preventing Recreational Water Illness Outbreaks." *Recreation Management*. July/August 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> Porton, Z. "Special Delivery." *Aquatics International*. January 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> Ford, R. *Certified Pool – Spa Operator Handbook*. National Swimming Pool Foundation, 2005.

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<sup>viii</sup> Williams, K. *Aquatic Facility Operator Manual*. National Recreation and Park Association, 2006.

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1165 words