

Pool lifeguards' certification – how is the education process in Brazil?

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Poster Session 2, Poster Foyer, November 5, 2015, 9:00 AM - 5:15 PM

In 1910, when people started using the beach for leisure in Brazil, only fishermen were responsible for preservation of life in water. This has created the need to establish organized lifesaving services around the country. Since 1984, the military firefighters took responsibility for lifeguarding all states of the Federation, especially at beaches.

In 2012, drowning data suffered a shift with only 15% of deaths occurring at beaches and 75% occurring at rivers, lakes, ponds and similar locations. Pools would be a location of limited relevance, representing only 2,6% of all deaths by drowning, if not for the fact that in children aged 1-9 years old it represents 53% of drowning deaths.

Brazil has an estimated 1,7 million pools with an estimated associated risk of 1 death per 639 pools. Although there is no Federal law to enforce safety measures at pools, SOBRASA has, for 10 years now, actively called for more attention to this topic and has submitted a law to the congress regarding safety at pools. Having well trained and equipped pool lifeguards during open-hours at all collective pools are one of the mandatory actions proposed.

Before 2008, this topic didn't receive much attention and the majority of pool lifeguards didn't have access to a certification process. In 2008, SOBRASA gathered a commission to strategically plan the best practices and policy to deal with their certification. By then, the few states that had a pool lifeguard graduation had their own way of doing it - class duration and contents varied widely. Cost of the certification is important since pool owners have no obligation to hire lifeguards and, when they do, salaries are below average for a job of such responsibility. Typical attendees are young men with basic education, from 18-25 years old, having another job. Hence available time outside their regular jobs was a concern and courses needed to be as short as possible, keeping the content to the essential but accomplishing all training objectives. Courses usually took 14 days costing 250USD, but since they're not available in all states, additional expenses for travelling, food and accommodation add to be considered.

After a few months debating the issue, the commission established a set of measures to improve the process:

- Reduce 50% of the actual cost – as candidates have difficulty to afford.
- Provide the candidate a better chance and time to assimilate the contents – as they have only basic education.
- Reduce the time of the course to less than 7 days – they usually take a leave and can't be away for long.
- Include essential contents for a job of such responsibility (at least 52 hours according to ILS) to ensure a minimum professional quality.

At the end a redesigned Pool-lifeguard certification process was achieved, detailed at SOBRASA's website and summarized below:

- 1) The courses should last at least 52h covering contents. Course contents are split into online (theoretical) and face-to-face (practical) components.
- 2) Theory is freely provided online including all contents and a quiz, and allowing candidates to take their time and as many tries as needed.
- 3) Candidates can only get to the practical part after achieving grades above 90% at the quiz
- 4) Face-to-face training is offered by any local fire department or pool company and includes a talk about all theoretical concepts learnt. Practical classes usually take no more than 5 days.
- 5) A SOBRASA's certified instructor conducts the final examination consisting of 4hours online and practical exam. Overall, candidates need to achieve a result of 60% or above.
- 6) Certification needs to be revalidated every 2 years by simply taking an online test.