

“ What if?” in back of beyond

Many of us who work and spend our leisure time in the great outdoors have asked the "what if?" question at least once. What if I have an incident? What if one of my family members hurt themselves? What if one of my participants has an accident? We are constantly balancing risk and reward. As an instructor in outdoor education I am constantly asking similar questions in aims to prevent such an occurrence. I feel I have done a pretty good job of listening to the adage, "good first aid is prevention". They say that 85% of injuries are preventable. I have had some close calls. Being Irish, my 4-leaf clover seems to be holding out pretty good. However, an adage is not much help if the clover gets washed down stream and Murphy's Law, the 15% that is not preventable, suddenly drops in on me. Complicate that with the nearest phone being 15 km away or the 911 dispatcher informs me the best arrival time is 5 to 6 hours.

The First Aid course I took through my work alluded to prevention too. They spoke of the three elements of first aid being prevention, recognition and treatment. I thought I was there to learn how to put on the new fancy Band-Aid that the safety committee just purchased. That's what First Aid always meant to me, how to treat someone that was hurt. I came to discover First Aid is more common sense than I've been lead to believe.

As I was sitting in the climate controlled classroom trying to stay awake, watching a finely crafted video on how to provide Artificial Respiration to somebody. I smiled inside to myself when the procedure indicated to just call 911. My mind wandered to one of the many canoe/ kayak trips I've been on and how trying to contact 911 became a lot more of a work out than just picking up the phone. After kayaking 8 km across a very windy lake to a payphone at a small park we had marked on our map, I was tongue fumbled when the dispatcher asked where to send the ambulance. I was at this park, but my buddy with the dislocated shoulder was 8 km due east. I recall the response from the dispatcher, " the Fire Dept. will be 45 min. to your location, sir". They indicated they would decide from there how to get to my buddy! Four creative hours later my buddy was at the Bridgewater hospital.....

As a leader for Wilderness trips and excursions I am always conscious of prevention. A big part of prevention is preparation. Scouts Canada sure has it figured out. To "be prepared" one must strive to maintain certification in their areas of expertise and to push their qualifications to higher standards. This question of standards is always one of controversy. Who sets the standards, which is responsible to evaluate and monitor the organization governed by the standards? As a Canoe Nova Scotia instructor I felt not only is it important to meet the standards set by CNS but to find ways to enhance my qualifications and skill base out of responsibility to my canoeing students and to protect myself.

Prevention through preparation is especially important considering the environments and locations outdoor folks naturally find themselves in. We all know that, "if you don't use it, you lose it".

After I practiced A.R. on the plastic human I had been given to learn with, they outlined complications and the possibility of having to continue A.R. for a prolonged amount of time. However, I wouldn't have to worry about that. Someone 911 sent would be coming to take over for me. Again my mind went to a canoe trip I had read about where canoeist went under the water from a tip on a choppy lake and the only thing that popped up for 15 – 20 seconds was his unzipped lifejacket. His partner, who was quick on the draw, dove in and surfaced with him. After a lot of coughing, sputtering and maneuvering they all got back in our boats and carried on. However, that wasn't the end of it. By the time they got to their campsite two hours later it was dusk and the guy that had taken the dunk was breathing in gurgles and coughing up pink froth like stuff. If they had any education at the time they would have been wary of secondary drowning setting in. They knew he was under for awhile and had swallowed a lot of water, but he was burping a lot and seemed O.K.. They could have aborted to roadside and a cabin that was very near where he took the dunk. Clearly more recognition skills would have saved them, and especially the injured party, six hours less pain and a rainy night evacuation.

As far as treatment goes, Richard Harvey alluded to it in last month's article. You can clearly prepare by taking a river rescue course. With those skills you can do a bang up job of getting your brother out of the drink. But if he is half conscious, vomiting has a big crack in his helmet and the cell phone and GPS is in his submerged boat 2 km downstream.....and still going. Do you know what to expect from these injuries 3 hours from now? Should your brother be moved? How should he be evacuated? How do you check for any other concerns? One thing is for certain; he won't last sitting in the 5 degree C water!

After my work First Aid course I felt very informed and confident that I could be of assistance and act in a First Aid emergency situation. However, this is not applicable in every FA situation. This course did a good job of what it was designed to do. It prepared me to be able to gain quick access to emergency services and how to provide short- term management of injuries. It answered a lot of questions for me, but opened up a lot too. With all my experience in places where 911 cannot even be contacted, let alone be able to access my location, all I have learned is I have to know more. I have been around long enough to know that some of the stuff I read in the newspaper can happen to me regardless of my 4-leaf clover.

Wilderness and Remote First Aid goes beyond Emergency First Aid and Standard First Aid. This specialized and experiential training suits the unique needs of any CNS member and even more so, the instructors. Consider the location of our classroom and the potential risk that could at any time threaten

Students. When I think back on past clinics I see just how remote I can become, even within the municipal limits. The 911 call becomes a false sense of security. I also understand the reality that advanced medical attention may be hindered in their attempts to reach my group and I in that quiet secluded cove. Ironically that same cove is the perfect location to demonstrate describe and do/practice our water safety aspect of the clinic.

A lot of unanswered questions get asked in First Aid courses on how to access help when you are far from the roadside. A Wilderness and Remote First Aid program will give you a better sense for how to answer your " what if s " when in the back of beyond, and just who is coming to help. As well, it will empower you to treat when injuries go well beyond the "Golden Hour".

Andrew Foran xperientia@hotmail.com is a Wilderness and Remote First Aid Instructor with the Canadian Red Cross, Outdoor Education Instructor, NSOLD Instructor for Wilderness Ethics and a CNS Canoe Instructor.

Blair Doyle adventure@hfx.eastlink.ca is a Wilderness and Remote First Aid Instructor Trainer and Medical First Response Instructor with the Canadian Red Cross and Internal Training Officer with Halifax Regional Search and Rescue