

Wave-pool lifeguards failed to spot lifeless child, inquest hears

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Five lifeguards were on duty at a Moncton water park the day 12-year-old Kyle Debow drowned, a coroner's inquest heard Tuesday.

Debow died last August 7, when his mother took him to Magic Mountain's wave pool to escape the summer heat. He was the oldest of three children and a Grade 6 student from Sussex Corner, just outside Moncton.

The pool was crowded with children and adults, and Debow had been in and out of the water all day, wearing a face mask and watching the swimmers underwater. His mother testified that he had only learned to swim a month earlier.

The boy was swimming with a friend, but they became separated, and when she ran to get his mother, another girl spotted Debow floating face down in the pool.

Five lifeguards were on duty while the pool waves were generated for 15-minute sessions, then two lifeguards when the waves were off for 10 minutes.



A lifeguard watches swimmers at the Magic Mountain water park in Moncton, N.B.

But none of the lifeguards noticed Debow's lifeless body.

An adult male swimming in the pool spotted the boy, turned him over, saw he was blue, and then struggled with two friends to get him up the pool ladder. That's when the lifeguards arrived and started doing CPR.

By then it was too late. The boy was rushed to hospital and pronounced dead around 6:30 p.m.

Lifeguards' testimony inconsistent

The five young lifeguards who tried to save Kyle's life testified Tuesday at the inquest looking into his death.

They were all qualified by the National Life Saving Society as lifeguards. They were also able to perform CPR, provide first aid and administer oxygen.

However, there were some discrepancies about which areas of the pool they were supposed to monitor.

One guard said she was assigned to watch the opposite side of the pool. Her counterpart on the other side said he was supposed to observe swimmers along a diagonal line going from the far end of the pool on his right to the shallow end on his left.

It's unclear if this left the section where Kyle was swimming unobserved by either lifeguard.



Kyle Debow, 12, drowned at the Magic Mountain water park in Moncton last summer.

One of the guards said she never noticed Kyle, while the other said he had seen the child floating with his mask on.

The lifeguard said many children wear masks in the pool.

There was also inconsistent testimony about the number of people in the pool.

Some of the lifeguards said they had no idea how many were in the pool. One said it could have been 1,000, while another thought it was closer to 100.

And one lifeguard said rescuers performed an adult version of CPR on the boy, while another said it was the child's version.

Magic Mountain general manager Mark Jelley says the lifeguards, all professionally trained and between the ages of 16 to 21, did their job properly. He says they were traumatized by the accident.

"It's always difficult to have them go through this," said Jelley. "For them, they've trained to respond to incidents, and here was something they trained for and responded to. And we're proud of the way they did that."

Victim's uncle doesn't blame anyone

Debow's uncle, Steven Brown, is not blaming anyone for Kyle's death, but he hopes the coroner's jury will be able to recommend changes that can prevent similar drowning in future.

"I think it's unfair for a lot of us to speculate because we weren't there, but you know it's certainly very difficult to hear some of the testimony," he said. "It's easy for us to say we would have done this, would have done that. But I think it must have been most difficult for the lifeguards as well. And maybe age does play a role, I don't know."

Four days have been set aside for the inquest. Testimony continues on Wednesday.

Kyle's death is the only fatality in the history of the water park, which opened in 1987.