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- CANADA
- WORLD
- DAILY FEATURE
- LAW & ORDER**
- MEDIA NEWS
- POLITICS
- SCIENCE
- SPACE
- TECH NEWS
- WEIRD NEWS
- WHAM! Gaming
- SPECIALS
- Sun Papers
- Columnists
- CNEWS Forum
- Lotteries
- Today in History
- Weather

N.B. inquest recommends tighter standards for pools
 By CHRIS MORRIS

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MONCTON, N.B. (CP) - Although a coroner's inquest has recommended changes to make public pools safer for children, a New Brunswick family is left with more questions than answers about the drowning of its "beautiful little boy."



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An inquest into the death last summer of 12-year-old Kyle DeBow at a popular water park recommended Friday more training for lifeguards, uniform provincial safety standards and the banning of diving masks at all public pools.

The boy, who was wearing a diving mask at the time of his death, was found floating face down in the wave pool at the Magic Mountain water park in Moncton on Aug. 7, 2005.

It is not known how long DeBow's lifeless body had been floating in the busy wave pool before he was finally noticed by other swimmers and pulled onto the deck.

It also isn't known what events led to the child's drowning, although there were no marks or bruises on his body to suggest trauma or injury.

Neither lifeguards on duty nor members of the boy's family, who were at another water attraction in the park, had been watching him.

"There are a great number of questions that have not been answered," Steven Brown, the boy's great uncle and spokesman for the DeBow family, said after the inquest concluded.

"Particularly, how long was he in this position before he was noticed? We're not passing blame, but it is almost inconceivable to understand how someone could be floating in a pool for that length of time and not be noticed."



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Brown said the biggest issue for the family was the fact a number of medical specialists who happened to be at the accident scene on that day were not allowed to help.

The four teenage lifeguards who were in charge of the wave pool refused all offers of help from bystanders, including from one physician who is an airway specialist and highly skilled in resuscitation techniques.

Coroner Gloria Merrithew made a separate recommendation at the end of the inquest that New Brunswick's LifeSaving Society meet with doctors, nurses and other medical specialists to sort out their ethical responsibilities to assist in emergencies.

Brown said that was the single-most important recommendation for the family.

"You have no idea what it's like to sit back and think, could it have changed things if they had been allowed to help?" he said.

"There is something wrong with the system when you have specialists available and they're not allowed to participate to save someone's life."

During the week-long inquest, the lifeguards who testified made no apologies for refusing help from bystanders, saying that in an emergency people desperate to help might exaggerate their qualifications.

They also argued that in swimsuits, off-duty doctors, nurses and paramedics all look the same.

But a number of bystanders were highly critical of the lifeguards, including a nurse who described the teenagers as "children trying to be heroes."

Andrew Robertson of Lower Sackville, N.S., helped get the boy out of the water. He said organizations like Magic Mountain should get serious about lifeguards.

"They shouldn't have Grade 11 and 12 kids lifeguarding," Robertson told the inquest.

"It's not that they don't care, but they're so busy worrying about how they look in their bikinis that they're not paying as much attention."

Mark Jelley, general manager of the Magic Mountain park, said tighter safety measures have been put in place since the DeBow death, including a ban on face masks in the park's pools.

He said the park is still reviewing its lifeguard standards and will consider the recommendations of the coroner's inquest, which include surf training for the lifeguards.

Brown said the DeBow family will never recover from the loss of Kyle.

The boy's mother, Beth, testified at the inquest but she was too emotional to speak to reporters at the conclusion of proceedings.

"It's too painful," Brown said as Beth DeBow choked back tears. "It was her beautiful little boy. That's how we feel."



opinion



Safe streets is goal

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