Case Study: Seeking Solace from the Sun

Disclaimer: This case study was prepared by Breanna Gilpin under the supervision of Dr. Frances Tuer, DeGroote School of Business, solely for the purpose of discussion. While the injury in the case actually took place all details of person(s) and organization(s) have been disguised.

**The Injury/Illness:**

It was a beautiful Saturday for the opening of Raspberry Resort’s outdoor pool. There was not a cloud in the sky and there was a high of 30 degrees with an expected humidex of 35. After a long, cold winter Anna was excited to get to in the sun and enjoy the outdoors. At 9am, she arrived at the pool with her sunglasses and sunscreen and joined her two co-workers in rotations on deck. Rochelle, the manager, stopped by to check on the pool and noted that the number of swimmers currently in the pool did not need 3 lifeguards. In order to save on costs, Rochelle sent one of the lifeguards home.

After two hours had elapsed, the temperatures had escalated to over thirty-five degrees and the pool had filled to maximum capacity. The ratio of visitors to lifeguards legally required that both Anna and Elizabeth remain on deck without breaks. Their water bottles had long been empty, and they were unable to leave the deck to refill them. Anna had realized that the sunscreen had not been working and that the two were getting burnt. As time progressed, she started to get a headache and to become nauseous. Her vision was becoming blurry, making it increasingly harder to focus on the moving bodies in the pool. Standing became difficult as she started to get light-headed and frequently felt dizzy. She was also sweating profusely but her skin was cool to the touch. The sun continued to beat down and the humidity was relentless.

**Who and What:**

This was Anna’s first season working at the resort. She had previously been employed at the town’s indoor pool but did not like working inside. Anna enjoyed being a lifeguard and was diligent in her responsibilities. Anna had only met the pool’s manager, Rochelle, briefly during her interview. Rochelle had the reputation of being hot-tempered. She was busy overlooking the pools as well as the various recreation centres and often missed relevant deadlines as a result.

The morning of the incident, Anna asked Rochelle if there were any umbrellas or sunscreen for the staff. Rochelle noted that umbrellas had been ordered and would arrive within the next few weeks and reminded them that sunscreen was the employees’ responsibility and would not be provided. She did offer some leftover hats from the previous season’s lost and found, but for fear of headlice, the two quickly rejected and Rochelle went home for the weekend.

**Background on This Type of Injury:**

Heat exhaustion occurs as a result of mass fluid loss and low salt intake which causes the body’s cooling system to start to break down. This happens as an individual’s body temperature surpasses 38-degrees Celsius (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2014). Common symptoms include heavy sweating with cool, moist skin. The individual may be tired, weak and experience nausea and/or vomiting. Additionally, they may be thirsty, and their breathing may become rapid or progress to panting. Finally, heat exhaustion may cause blurry vision. Heat exhaustion requires immediate attention, or it can progress to heat stroke which may be fatal. It is important to move the person to a cool and shaded area. If possible, any heavy or excessive clothing should be removed. The individual should drink plenty of water and apply cool, wet towels to areas including armpits, back of the neck and back of the knees to cool the body down. It is important to monitor the individual to ensure that they are cooling down and remain at a safe temperature.

Heat exhaustion is a common workplace injury for outdoor occupations including landscapers, construction workers and life guards. Workers in environments with significant sources of heat are also vulnerable including bakers, fire fighters and foundries. Over 220 workers across Canada and the United States die annually from heat stress (Workers Health & Safety Centre, n.d.). Individuals that are old, that are ill or that are not climatized to the conditions are particularly susceptible. In environments where heat stroke is a possibility, it is important to reduce activity and exposure to the heat. Also, workers should take breaks in cool areas and drink sufficient fluids. It is important to note that there is no legislation-related explicitly to heat stress. However, employees are protected under clause 25(2)(h) of the Ontario Health and Safety Act, which requires employers to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2016). Additionally, the Ontario Ministry of Labour provides several guidelines related to heat stress that employers can refer to in order to ensure a high level of protection for employees.

**What to do Next?**

The number of pool-goers started to dwindle, and the two lifeguards were able to rest in the guard hall, which had a fan and some water. After a few hours, Anna started to feel better. She had realized that she had been a victim of heat exhaustion. At the end of her shift, she closed the pool, went home, continued to hydrate and got some much-needed rest in her air-conditioned house.

The next morning Anna awoke with a clear head, having recovered from the heat exhaustion she had suffered. She began to consider her options to avoid this from happening again. First, Anna could wait for the umbrellas to arrive and bring her own sunscreen and water. Although this would not help her coworkers, Anna could ensure that she would be protected from further heat exhaustion.

Second, Anna could approach Rochelle about a plan of action to reduce the possibility of heat exhaustion. Although this would be direct, Anna found this approach daunting due to her unfamiliarity with her manager. She was intimidated by Rochelle and was worried she would irritate her superior.

Finally, Anna could approach her head life guard, Justin. He had experience working outside at this particular resort and would be aware of the factors that contribute to heat exhaustion. He was well respected and appearedto have a strong working relationship with Rochelle. Unfortunately, Justin was on vacation for a week and half and Anna would not be able to contact him until he returned.