

Professional Standards Committee - Annual Report 2013

Accidents and Incidents Summary

In total we have received 33 accident reports in 2013.

These resulted in four Inquiries and, of these, two proceeded to PSC Hearings. I am pleased to report that there were no fatalities this year.

My predecessor (Peter Cliff) noted that, "although year on year accident numbers appear to be on the increase, this could be as a result of our very healthy reporting culture". However, this year almost all reports relate to accidents that resulted in injury. It is important that we also report incidents and unintended events.

Processing an Accident or Incident Report involves the BMG in relatively little work, but it does mean that, should there ever be a claim against the guide, the Insurance Company has been informed and will honour its commitment.

The following accidents are worthy of comment:

1. A guide was involved in an avalanche whilst ski touring in Austria and as a result was very seriously injured. An Inquiry Guide was appointed and a report received by BMG. Lessons learned will follow.
2. A client suffered a broken leg as a result of fall whilst off-piste skiing near Chamonix. This accident was the subject of a PSC Hearing. On the recommendation of the PSC, the BMG issued the Guide with a reprimand (for the way that the activity was being undertaken at the time of the accident) and a substantial fine for submitting inaccurate and misleading reports of the events surrounding the accident. In addition, the following lessons learned were identified:
 - Guides need to set objectives and make plans that are appropriate to the conditions, the aspirations, size, experience and skill of the group. Having arrived at a plan for the day, the Guide should think very carefully before altering the plan to include more ambitious objectives.
 - Guides must be mindful of accepted Guiding ratios and must comply with any local norms. Guides must also consider how things may look to an "outside observer" – who may only see the Guide embarking on a steep off-piste descent with 9 clients seemingly under their care.
 - Guides need to give careful thought as to how they use experienced members of the group in safety critical roles.

- Guides need to provide appropriate briefings to their clients so that they understand the risks associated with the proposed venture and are in possession of enough information to give informed consent.
3. A client suffered mild frost nip during a winter alpine climbing trip.
 4. A client was hit by a lump of ice (whilst belaying a Guide) climbing a cascade. The following lessons learned were identified:
 - Guides must expect ice to fall when cascade climbing; plan the route, runners and belays accordingly.
 - In-situ belays may not always be in the best place.
 - When a client has been hurt (and potentially seriously injured) the guide should alert the rescue services.
 - If the guide cannot guarantee that the client can be positioned out of the fall line of any debris think carefully about the choice of route.
 5. A client was injured when he fell into a snow filled streambed whilst taking part in a “navigation on skis” training session in poor visibility. The following Lessons Learned were identified:
 - The guide needs to have a range of strategies for managing the group - and needs to ensure that the chosen strategy is being properly implemented.
 - Don't delegate responsibility to others - the guide is in charge.
 - When clients are being trained to lead on skis, the guide should be in very close proximity to the leader so as to be able to take control of decision making and hazard evaluation if required.
 - Poor visibility is a contributory factor to incidents, even in familiar terrain.
 6. An Aspirant Guide assisted with the rescue of another group who were involved in a serious avalanche incident in the Cairngorms.
 7. Following an update from BMG insurers a closed PSC matter (i.e. the PSC Hearing took place some time ago and recommendations were made to, and accepted by, the Management Committee) was reconvened. The members of the reconvened PSC Hearing confirmed the original findings and a report was prepared for the Management Committee.
 8. A guide and client were injured when the client fell (whilst moving together). The guide failed to hold the client and as a result also fell. Fortunately, after 20m, the guide regained control and fall was arrested. Both evacuated by helicopter. Lessons learned will follow.
 9. Client suffered a broken leg following a simple slip on a footpath descending from the Ferpectle Glacier. Able to descend with assistance.

10. Client suffered cuts and bruises following a trip descending from the Pas de Cheve (Arolla).
11. Client suffered from AMS whilst undergoing acclimatisation above Grindelwald. Descended by train but went to hospital. It seems that he may have had an undisclosed pre-existing medical condition.
12. Client suffered minor injuries following a slip on snow whilst approaching a rock climb. Guide had decided that it was not necessary to rope up and clients had no ice axes. The following lessons learned were identified:
 - Clients operating on snow, wearing crampons and not carrying an ice axe is not normal practice.
 - It is for the Guide to decide if the clients need to be roped up - not a decision for the clients.
 - Guides need to think carefully about the decision making process that is followed in deciding to allow the clients to operate un-roped and without ice axes on snowy terrain.
13. A guide and his clients suffered serious injuries when a direct belay (being used to safeguard the client's descent) failed resulting in both guide and client following a considerable distance. An Inquiry Guide was appointed and a report received by PSC. Lessons to be learned will be identified in due course.
14. A client was seriously injured when he fell from a rock climb. At the time, he was being "belayed" by another client under the supervision of a guide. This accident resulted in a PSC Hearing and the following lessons learned have been identified by the Inquiry Committee and endorsed by the PSC (which, although obvious, are worth restating):
 - Thin ropes need to be paired carefully to appropriate belay devices and, even then, effective control of the rope in the belay device needs constant vigilance together with a high level of skill.
 - Guides must be extra cautious when they pass responsibility to clients for safety critical tasks like belaying. The guide must be sure (through practical confirmation) that clients are able to fulfill these responsibilities.
 - Guides need to effectively communicate their plans to the clients. This communication must also make clear the various roles and responsibilities that each member of the team will be expected to fulfill (and in the case of clients, ensure that they are comfortable with their expected role).

The Guide involved has been suspended and is required to take a two-day assessment.

15. Twelve of the reported accidents occurred on skis and the following observations may be of interest:

- Only two of the accidents happened on serious terrain; almost all happened either on the piste or near the piste.
- Many of the accidents happened at the end of the day when clients may have been fatigued.
- Some of the accidents happened out of sight of the Guide and this emphasises the need for supervision in even the most benign terrain (often the accidents occurred on marked pistes in good conditions!).
- In several of the accidents the client's bindings failed to release. I have asked the Training Committee to give some thought to how we, as Guides, evaluate the clients boot/binding/ski combination together with the binding settings and fitting. Members may find Mike Langran's excellent web site Ski-Injury.com interesting.
- Poor technique on behalf of the client is commonly identified as the cause of the accident. An alternative view could be that clients are skiing terrain or snow beyond their abilities.....

Other Matters

The two PSC Hearings were conducted in Manchester (one at the Office's of the BMC and the other at a hotel at Manchester airport). PSC Hearings are very expensive to the Association – both in terms of our time and the real costs arising. Each hearing typically involves 10 days of volunteer effort (in addition the time I spend as Chair of PSC) and a considerable amount of preparation and travel.

In total we have relied upon the expertise of 28 members of the Association this year in dealing with Inquiries, Inquiry Committees and PSC Hearings. Without exception all have given of their time and expertise generously and with dedication.

I have also asked Guide's on a number of occasions to provide "support" to members who have suffered accidents or who are responding to Inquiries or PSC Hearings. This is a crucial role, and at times difficult role.

Thank you

I would like to thank the members of the Association who have contributed to the processes of the PSC. Their contribution is vital to the work and well being of the Association. I have been endlessly impressed by their commitment, dedication and expertise. The fact that they do this in an entirely voluntary capacity, often at short notice, is worthy of special mention.

Private and Confidential
BMG Annual Report 2013

I would finally like to thank our President, Tim Walker, and Secretary, Libby Peter, for all of their help with the management of our PSC systems.

Iain Peter
Chair, PSC
Kingussie
3rd November 2013