

Water district's pension spike opens up a can of worms.
Opinion, inside

LOCAL



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OC WATCHDOG YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK

Dangers lurk not so deep

A Seal Beach man finds himself in a sticky situation after trying out a type of drain cover required at public pools.



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Nearly half of the public pools and spas in Orange County — 3,451 of 7,376, to be exact — have submitted paperwork to prove they comply with new federal safety rules, says Richard Sanchez, Orange County's director of environmental health.

The overwhelming majority are simply replacing drain covers so people won't get stuck to them.

Tim McIntyre has a cau-

tionary tale to offer. McIntyre doesn't usually lie underwater at the bottom of hot tubs, but he did, and he wants you to know that the stuff billed as safe may not, under some circumstances, be safe at all, and he has pictures of the welts to prove it.

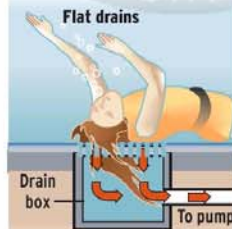
McIntyre, of Seal Beach, has two children with autism who love to swim. His teenage daughter is especially fond of exploring surfaces and tex-

tures, even below the surface.

So when the pool and spa at his Rossmoor Park condo complex closed this year to come into compliance with the new — and somewhat confounding — Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act, McIntyre was curious to see what had changed and whether those changes would work for his little Jacque

Pool safety

Drains with an anti-entrapment cover, right, can help prevent swimmers from being trapped. The drains are round and extend beyond the edge of the drain box, allowing water to enter from small openings on the side and preventing the powerful suction force that holds swimmers underwater.



Flat drains allow tight seal, permitting powerful suction



Anti-entrapment drain prevents seal

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POOLS

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The new pool rules, which apply to every public pool in America – whether it belongs to a homeowners association or apartment complex or hotel or gym or school – require the installation of anti-entrapment drain covers so people don't get stuck to them. If the pool has only one drain, the rules also require installation of an automatic pump shutoff system, a safety vacuum release system or another suction-limiting release system.

Once, McIntyre's community hot tub had little plastic drains that popped out a bit, so a person wouldn't get stuck. Now, McIntyre spied three long, flat drains at the bottom of the hot tub.

Someone sitting across a drain at the bottom of the pool wouldn't get stuck. But what if someone lay along that drain, covering it the long way with his whole body?

McIntyre turned scientist. He submerged himself, hovered over the drain, then lowered himself onto the grate.

"He felt suction on his chest and trunk area," says a report McIntyre made to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which is in charge of the new pool rules. "He stated that his body completely blocked the grate. He waited for a vacuum release to cut off the suction, which he thought would happen instantaneously. He was trapped to the drain."

It only lasted a second. McIntyre pushed himself off and rolled away. "His chest showed considerable redness and welts where the suction had held him to the grate," the report says.

McIntyre's neighbors weren't happy with him when the tub shut down for a second time as the commission investigated.

In the end, his homeowners association rerouted the tub so one jet sucked in rather than blowing out.

That reduced the power of the bottom drain's suction and made things safer.

"I liked the old drains better," McIntyre said.

The Pool Safety Council, which is working with the commission

on getting people up to speed on the new rules, warns that so-called unblockable drains (read: bigger than usual) are not unblockable at all, even though they technically bring pools into compliance with the new rules.

If a pool has one of these "unblockable drains," it's not required to have that second tier of anti-entrapment/anti-suction devices.

"This is a pretty huge deal," the council's Ben Schneider said in an e-mail. "We certainly don't know just how many unblockable drains are out there that don't have an additional layer of protection."

So buyer, and swimmer, beware.

Sanchez, the county's environmental health director, said the county compliance rate is about 47 percent and that new paperwork is always arriving as more people come up to speed on the rules, which took effect in December.

The county has no jurisdiction to enforce the new laws, which are federal, but it is charged with reviewing plans for the construction and retrofitting of pools. Links to Orange County's guidelines for complying with the new law are online.

The Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act is named in honor of former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's 7-year-old granddaughter. The girl was trapped by the strong suction of a hot tub drain in 2002 and drowned.

There are similar stories: A 6-year-old Nebraska girl was playing in a kiddie pool in 2007 when she got stuck to the pool's powerful drain and was disemboweled.

The safety commission counts 74 cases of "drain entrapment" in pools and spas between 1999 and 2007, resulting in nine deaths.

The federal government will spend \$29 million on these new rules over five years: \$4 million to help pool operators install safer drains and \$25 million on education.

And here we always ask: Money well spent?

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