

VGB Media Coverage Takes a New Tone

By Rebecca Robledo | 7.21.2009

Media coverage focusing on the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act has intensified in frequency and tone, due in part to national television spots initiated by the Pool Safety Council.

Summer began, as it does every year, with a ramping up of pool safety stories in the mainstream media.

But the tenor changed in early July after two networks covered the topic of entrapment within a few days of each other.

On July 6, NBC's "Today Show" aired an investigative piece accusing pool operators of putting children in danger. A similar segment ran three days later on CBS' "The Early Show."

Neither report acknowledged the differences in hazard between shallow- and deep-water vessels, or the challenges inherent in bringing some pools into compliance. Both segments characterized all retrofits as simple drain-cover swaps.

After the national television coverage, local stories seemed to take a more accusatory tone. Websites also pitched in, such as InjuryBoard.com, which published the headline, "Why Are Unprotected Pool Drains Still Threatening Our Children?"

Another Website, Momlogic.com, followed suit with "Swimming Pools Are Child Death Traps."

The additional focus on pool safety is partly due to the summer season, but there's another reason why VGB has been in the spotlight.

The Pool Safety Council — a privately funded organization spearheaded by safety product manufacturers — claimed significant responsibility for the increase in press coverage.

George Pellington, East Coast sales manager for Vac-Alert, appeared on the CBS piece as the spokesman for the Pool Safety Council. He took reporter Susan Koeppen to PSC's testing laboratory to demonstrate the hazards of using a flat drain cover. A rubber duck was placed over the cover and when the toy became "entrapped," Koeppen tried unsuccessfully to dislodge it.

It was PSC's efforts in reaching out to major networks that prompted the segments, said John Procter, communications director of the Washington D.C.-based organization. "I thought [the 'Today Show' segment] was a fantastic story, as was the CBS story," Procter said. "We were overjoyed."

The group works with local media as well.

In June, the widow of a Pittsburgh drowning victim filed a lawsuit against an athletic club, stating that her husband had been stuck to a pool drain when he died.

However, detectives arriving on the scene did not believe that the drain posed any type of factor in the incident. The case is still pending.

In reporting the lawsuit, the local press depicted the incident as an entrapment. PSC issued a press release in response to the coverage.

"We know there are more facts to come out in terms of the investigation, but we are operating not only off the press reports, but off the fact that the family has filed a lawsuit against the property, and within that lawsuit outlines their reasoning by entrapment," Procter said.

PSC also is working with those who have experienced entrapments. The group is consulting with the family of a Florida boy who was entrapped on his home spa.

"They're sharing their story with local television news, local reporters," Procter said. "And we're trying to raise [entrapment] awareness. ..."

As a result of the "Today Show" segment, the mother of a young girl contacted PSC saying that her child experienced an entrapment incident at a waterpark in Texas, Procter said.

According to a PSC press release, Tandra Walton's daughter became stuck for several seconds on a wall drain. The incident caused a bruise on her inner thigh. No further details were provided.

One of the most recent examples of PSC's outreach is on the Website ifawebnews.com. The site serves as a news and information source for the insurance industry, and in July published a story titled, "Insurers Flailing on New Pool Safety Law, Group Says."

The article states that a nonprofit pool safety organization is reaching out to insurers to make them aware of the VGB law and the potential liability for noncompliant pools. PSC plans to create educational materials for insurance companies and their brokers, and to serve as a technical resource, according to the story.

