

# A Drinking

An eye-opening survey suggests lifeguards may be coming to work hung over, and even intoxicated, more than anyone realizes | by Mike Bearak and Gary Thill

Years ago, I was sitting in the lifeguard stand only to get a message that the guard coming in to relieve me was not going to make it because he was sick. When I relayed the message to the aquatics director, he didn't buy it. Upon calling his home, the guard's mother said, "Oh, he went to Greensboro last night and hasn't come home yet." The news didn't shock the director; he just sat back and informed the mother that her son was due to work in less than 30 minutes.

The guard did make it to the facility and did look a little hung over. As punishment, the director had him clean the stainless steel. There were at least three occasions where this guard had to run to the bathroom to throw up, coming out wiping his face clean. It was sad to see the lack of understanding this young man had for the task and responsibilities with which he had been empowered. I thought about him for many years and wondered how many others came to work in the same condition.

Today, as an aquatics director at the Simmons YMCA in Charlotte, N.C., I am even more concerned.

For the most part, aquatics professionals work with young adults who often experiment with drugs and alcohol, whether it's legal or not. In short, they need supervision.

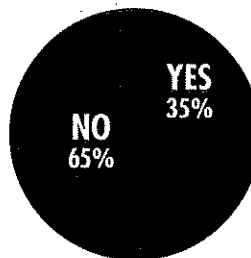
But that supervision can be sometimes be lacking, especially on weekends, prime time for parties and drinking that can result in hung-over guards who shouldn't be at their stations. Some may even drink at work.

And the problem may be bigger than any of us realize, according to a recent nationwide survey of more than 6,400 lifeguards, which I conducted on alcohol consumption and work habits.

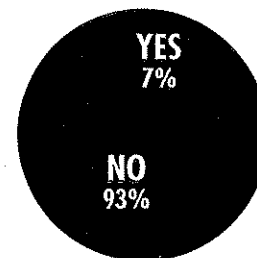
Among the findings, nearly 35 percent of guards have gone to work intoxicated and nearly 70 percent have reported for work hung over. Given the effects of alcohol, both during and after consumption, and the lifesaving responsibilities of guards, these are troubling statistics to say the least. Some experts think it's time for directors and managers to

## Guarding while intoxicated

Have you ever gone to work intoxicated?



Have you ever consumed an alcoholic drink while at work or on a break?



Number of times guards have worked intoxicated

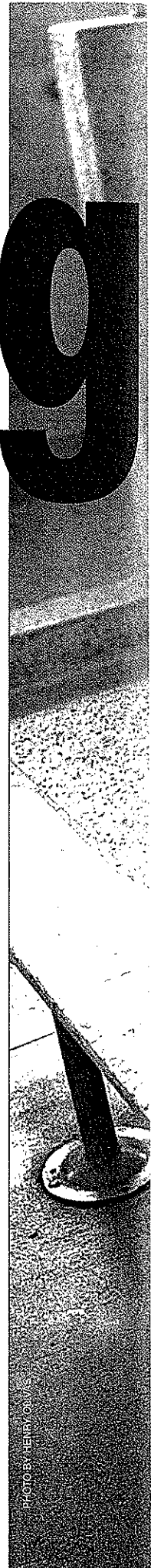
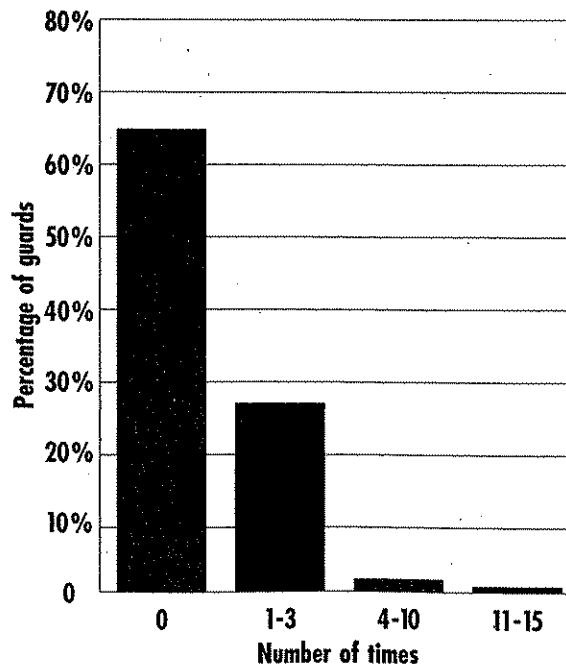


PHOTO BY HENRY COVATIS

## Effects of alcohol

**A**lcohol impairment happens faster than most people realize. For a 180-pound person on an empty stomach drinking over a one-hour period, it takes just one beer to raise blood alcohol concentrations to .02; two beers takes it to .04; and four drinks raises it to .08, legally drunk in most states. Here's a look at the different lifeguarding skills that are affected, and how quickly those changes can occur.

### Attention

After just two beers, your ability to watch two or more people in different locations — something called divided attention — begins to be impaired.

### Vision

After one beer, your ability to look at a bright light, such as the sun reflecting off the water, and refocus is impaired.

### Reaction time

After three beers, your ability to monitor and react to incidents can be slowed down.

### Focus

The tendency to focus on objects longer than appropriate, called "dwell time," increases significantly after three to four beers.

### Balance

The vestibular system, which controls orientation and balance, becomes impaired after two beers. That means if you're looking to the left and then suddenly turn your head to the right, you could become disoriented. It will also make it more difficult to climb out of your chair and keep your balance.

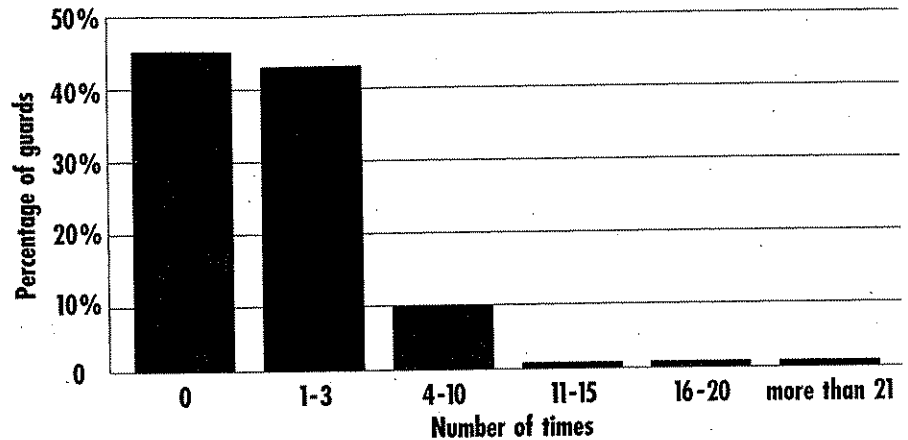
*Source: Bud Perrine, Vermont Alcohol Research Center.*

recognize the problem and do something about it — or pay the consequences.

"Lifeguards cannot act unless they observe a problem. And people who are im-

## Hangover handicap

Number of times guards have come into work with a hangover in the last year



States Lifesaving Association in San Diego.

Allowing an alcohol-impaired guard on duty can lead to other consequences as well. "Should an accident occur at a facility, a savvy attorney will inquire into 'evening before' activities in an attempt to establish that the lifeguards themselves contributed to the accident/injury by knowingly engaging in activities proven to decrease attentiveness and response," warns Shawn DeRosa, a consultant for the Aquatic Safety Research Group in State College, Pa.

### Hangovers

As the survey indicates, guards seem to be engaging in an alarming number of those "evening before" activities. Of the guards responding to the survey, 67 percent say they've gone in hung over sometime during their careers. In the last year, 39 percent admit to being hung over at work four to 10 times; 31 percent say they came to work hung over one to three times; only 2 percent say they never came to work hung over.

"Following high levels of alcoholic intoxication, an increase in dwell time errors [the tendency to focus on objects longer than appropriate] was observable ... for at least 18 hours after peak blood alcohol concentrations were reached, and for at least 10 hours after the blood alcohol concentrations returned to zero," according to a study on alcohol and diving performance, funded by the National Swimming Pool Foundation, based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The study goes on to say that reaction times, critical in lifesaving, suffered up to 18 hours after drinking. For instance, hangovers can reduce driving ability as much as 20 percent. What's more, beer — the drink of choice among guards surveyed — produces the worst hangover effects.

"The residual effects of alcohol are surprisingly profound, yet we're not as aware of them because the neural mechanism that we use to make us aware has been impaired," says Bud Perrine, director and senior scientist at the Vermont Alcohol Research

Should an accident occur, a savvy attorney will inquire into 'evening before' activities in an attempt to establish that the lifeguards themselves contributed to the accident.



paired from drugs or alcohol are by definition going to be less able to spot problems. ... A momentary lapse in concentration can mean the difference between a drowning prevented and a drowning that occurs," says Chris Brewster, president of the United

Just as disturbing are guards' attitudes toward working in an alcohol-impaired condition. While nearly 70 percent report coming to work hung over, only 23 percent think it inhibited their ability to do their job.

Science says otherwise.

**64** ▶ Percentage of respondents who have made one or more rescues in their lifeguarding career

## A Drinking Problem

Center in Colchester, Vt. "We lose our self-inspection equipment."

That's why some airlines have adopted a "24 hour bottle to throttle," rule when it comes to drinking, says Perrine, who also did research on the effects of alcohol on

ally drunk the night before, he's not going to be performing well the next day," says Louise Priest, communications director at Jeff Ellis & Associates in Indianapolis. "They are responsible for lives, and they could be responsible for someone dying. ..."

Another guard, while on break, approached me and asked if I wanted to down a quick beer at his car.

shallow-water entry diving.

Clearly, supervisors need to do a better job educating guards about how drinking and hangovers affect their ability to save lives.

"While managers cannot control off-duty behavior of employees, they should at a minimum explain to staff that 'evening prior' activities can adversely affect on-duty job performance," DeRosa says. "In the case of aquatics, this can mean the difference between life and death."

Other lifeguarding agencies agree. "Hangovers are a problem because if the kid's re-

### Drinking on the job

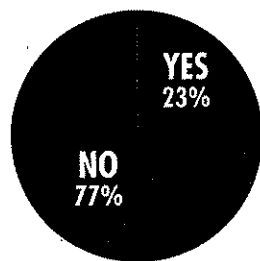
Hangovers are one thing, but what about actually drinking on the job, or coming to work intoxicated? Again the survey reveals some startling answers.

Nearly 35 percent of guards surveyed acknowledge reporting for work intoxicated at some time in their careers. More than 27 percent say that in the past year, they came to work intoxicated one to three times; 43 percent say they did so one to 20 times. More than 7 percent even admit to consuming alcohol while at work or on break.

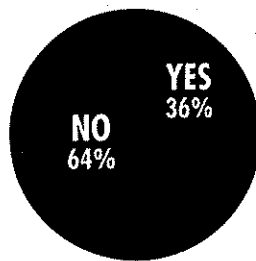
"It happened during the summer and

## Working it off

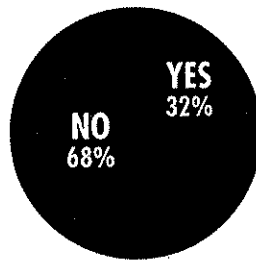
Has a prior night of drinking ever affected your work performance the next day?



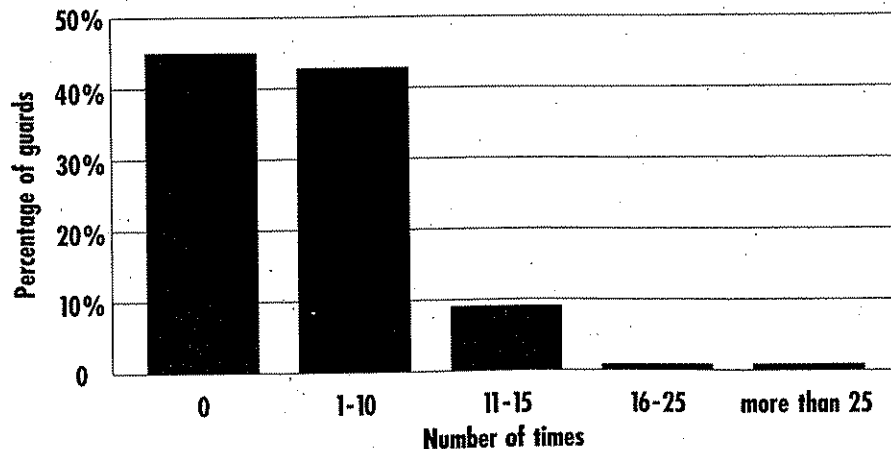
Has it affected your performance in the last month?



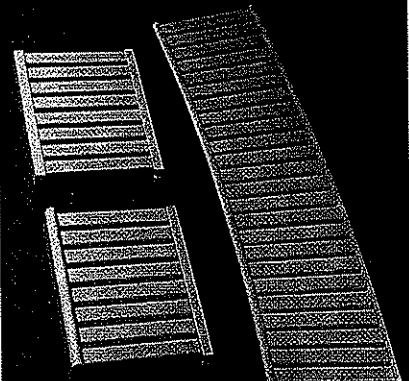
Has it happened more than once in the last month?



Number of times it has happened in the last year.



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another guard, while on break, approached me and asked if I wanted to down a quick beer at his car," reports a 21-year-old life-

stories are disturbing. "A lifeguard coming to work under the influence will not be as alert, vigilant or effective as he

Water Rescue Lifesaving Resources in Harrisville, N.H.

The American Red Cross in Washing-

People say, 'Oh, I'm not under the influence.' But if there's an emergency, there's going to be some loss of response time. Most people feel they have better control than they do.

guard. She says she has known guards who consumed alcohol while on duty.

Considering alcohol's effects, such

should be to prevent, recognize or manage the incident," notes Gerry Dworkin, a consultant with Aquatics Safety &

ton, D.C., minces no words when it comes to the subject. "Alcohol and lifeguards do not mix," says ARC spokesperson Stacey

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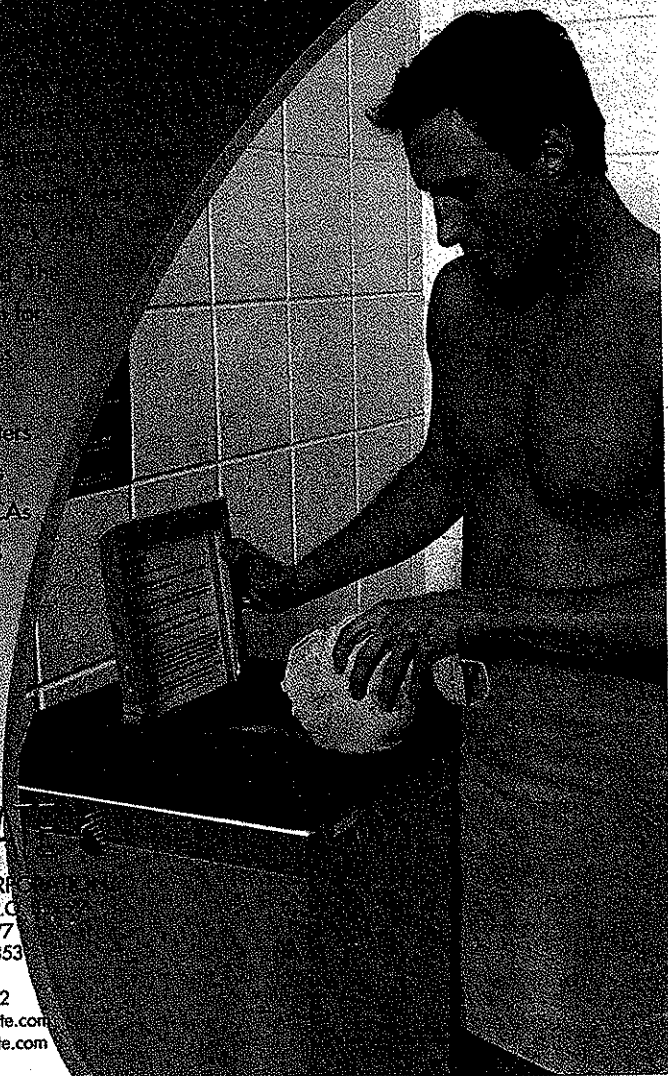
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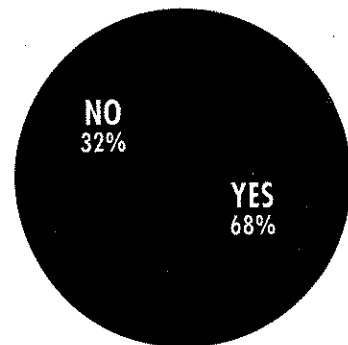
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### Have you ever come to work with a hangover?



Grissom. "We highly, highly discourage lifeguards from engaging in alcohol use while they are on duty. It's dangerous and it puts them and patrons at risk."

Scientific studies back up that conviction. Typically, it takes just one or two beers to begin affecting response times, according to Glen Egstrom, professor emeritus in the Physiological Sciences Department at the University of California - Los Angeles and a researcher for NSPF on alcohol and response times.

Egstrom explains that alcohol is a dose-dependent drug, meaning its effects depend on how much is in your system. "The more you take, the more you're going to have reaction time changes. And there's a point at which you become a hazard," he notes.

That point arrives much faster than many people realize, especially those who have been drinking. In fact, it only takes the equivalent of one or two beers to "significantly degrade" quick reaction times, according to the NSPF-funded study.

"People say, 'Oh, I'm not under the influence.' But the fact is, if there's an emergency, there's going to be some loss

# 31

► Percentage of guards who had to perform CPR in their career

# A Drinking Problem

of response time," Egstrom says. "Most people feel they have better control than they actually do. They simply ignore the changes in response time."

"It's the responsibility of the manager to assess the ability of their lifeguards to be on the stand every day," says Jill White, founder/president of Starfish Aquatics Institute in

to see if they're intoxicated. You're looking to see if they can scan and stay vigilant."

But that's not always enough because impairment from low levels of alcohol is difficult

**The bombshell of this study is that those who think their staffs have been clean are wrong.**

## What can be done

That's where directors and managers come in, say some experts.

Savannah, Ga. "Certainly, if someone walks in with alcohol on their breath, that's an obvious sign. But you're not really looking

to spot, even for professionals, Brewster says. He adds that many supervisors also may feel "socially intimidated" about confronting some-

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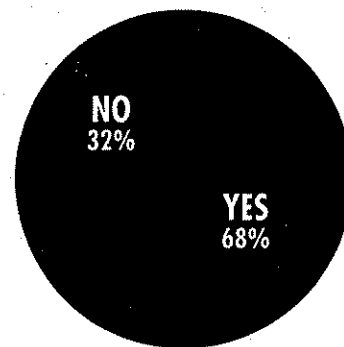
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**Have you come to work hung over 1-5 times or more in the last month?**



one they suspect of being under the influence.

"The bombshell of this study is that those who think their staffs have been clean and pure, or that they can easily spot people under the influence are wrong," Brewster says.

Still, most experts agree that directors and managers need to make clear, strict rules about drinking and stick to them. "We think lifeguards should not be drinking during the season," Priest says flatly.

Brewster adds that some guards may come to work impaired because they work under strict absenteeism policies. Directors need to tell guards they would rather have them miss work than come in hung over or intoxicated, he says.

Still, to really deal with the problem, some professionals advocate random drug testing to enforce such rules. "My view is that random testing is critical," Brewster says.

Perrine advocates breath testing. He says screening units can be purchased for \$40 to \$50. Others say guards should be held to the same standards as other life-saving professionals.

**84** > Percentage of guards who say they drink alcoholic beverages, with 72 percent preferring beer

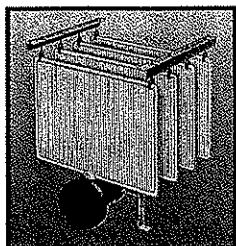
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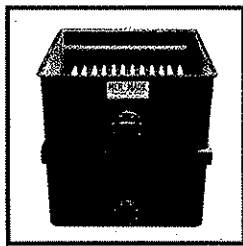
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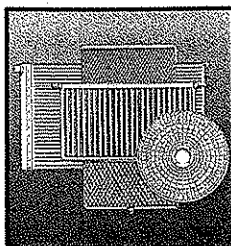
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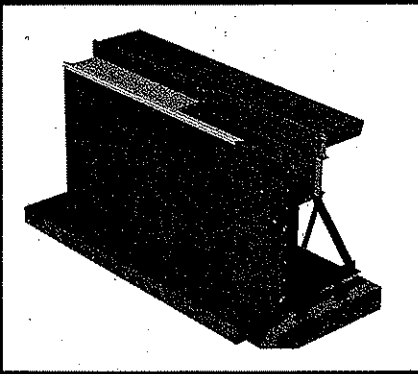
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**A Drinking Problem**

**76** ➤ Percentage of respondents who said that they have driven while intoxicated; four admit to receiving DUI or DWI convictions

"I was not permitted to consume alcohol or intake drugs while on the job, or within eight hours of reporting to work," says Dworkin, a former firefighter/EMT. "To do so would jeopardize the safety of not only myself, but that of my fellow firefighters/EMTs, as well as the public I was responsible for protecting. I believe lifeguards should be held to the exact same standard."

The trouble is that for the most part lifeguards aren't nearly as mature as those

I was not permitted to consume alcohol while on the job or within eight hours of reporting to work as a firefighter/EMT. Lifeguards should be held to the exact same standard.

professionals — or as well-paid. Many of them are still minors.

That's why it's important to involve the parents as well, says Priest. "If there is an incident and someone dies, the parents' assets are at risk also," she says. "So we need to educate both guards and their parents."

Ultimately, though, the lifeguard profession must figure out how to deal with its drinking issue. "Some people might say kids will be kids, but they're performing a very adult function," Perrine says. "And these kids are doing a job that really has the ultimate adult responsibilities — life and death." **AI**

*An unscientific blind survey was conducted, with 6,430 responses from survey packets sent out to more than 1,400 facilities in the United States and Canada. Any survey with a name, age, sex or working location was thrown out. There was no place on the survey for any personal information and this was done to help keep the study blind. The survey was conducted in late 2002 and early 2003.*

# A Matter of Life and Death

**H**e looked young, too young to carry such a heavy burden. On grainy video, "Reed" recalled the day he saw a young girl die on his lifeguard watch. With halting words, he said he still remembered his fellow guard breaking the surface with the lifeless girl in his arms. That night, he said, he kept seeing the little girl in his room, had to keep the light on. Sometimes, even four years later, he still does.



The video, part of a seminar I recently attended, was a stark reminder of the heavy responsibilities lifeguards shoulder every day. And it only reinforced the importance of an article in this month's issue. The article focuses on a survey that asked lifeguards about their alcohol consumption and work habits, and it produced some disturbing results.

It may be no surprise that some lifeguards drink. Many of them, like Reed, are young kids, eager to experiment, have fun. But for lifeguards, the fun should never affect their job performance. Too often, it does. The survey even found that some lifeguards are drinking at work.

Certainly, none of this is done maliciously. Most lifeguards who work impaired by alcohol probably have no idea of the risks they're taking. That's why this article is so important. Along with suggesting how big the problem is, it goes into detail about how hangovers and drinking affect key lifeguarding skills such as reaction time, alertness and scanning abilities.

I know the article and its implications might make some people angry. How dare we question the integrity of lifeguards. How dare we give attorneys more ammunition to go after guards and facilities. How dare we publish an unscientific survey as fact.

Whatever the reaction, I hope people read it. I hope lifeguards read it. I hope directors read it and pass it on to their guards. I hope anyone with any association to lifeguarding takes the information to heart. Maybe it will encourage more facilities to develop tough new standards on alcohol use, along with educational campaigns about why lifeguarding and drinking don't mix.

Because as bad as it must feel for a lifeguard such as Reed to see someone die on his watch, imagine how much worse it would feel knowing that you weren't at 100 percent when it happened. That maybe you could have saved someone's life if you just hadn't partied so hard the night before, or had a quick beer on break. Then imagine having to live with that question, that death, the rest of your life. **A**

Gary Thill, Editor  
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