

## **WHEN A TRIP MEMBER IS INJURED: BEDSIDE MANNER AND THE OUTING LEADER**

*By John Edginton*

As Chairman of the Sierra Club's Insurance Committee I am often called upon to explain why the Sierra Club has enjoyed an excellent loss history with regard to accidents on both national and chapter outings. A number of factors contribute to our successful record: good safety practices on outings, the reluctance of loyal and/or sympathetic members to sue the Club, a realization that the participant is often at fault for the injury, and fate.

But there is another factor at work here which prevents claims, one that I think is as important as any of the others: the good "bedside manner" of our outing leaders toward a trip member who is injured.

It goes without saying that we should operate our outings and activities as safely and cautiously as possible, consistent with the goals and nature of the activity. We need to reinforce good leader traits and skills with training, and create opportunities for leaders to network and discuss their experiences, problems, and solutions. We should also encourage fellowship among our participants so that their loyalty and restrained litigiousness continues. But as we do all of that, we should also be sure that this other important skill is in our repertoire.

The expression "bedside manner" is commonly used in reference to a medical practitioner. A physician with excellent bedside manner conveys confidence and concern in caring for his or her patient, regardless of the stress involved. Likewise, an outing leader should exhibit confidence and concern toward an injured participant, not only as a common courtesy but for the purpose of preventing claims.

Techniques like bedside manner are part of the "soft" side of leadership -- namely people-to-people skills. All leaders have different personalities and will approach each situation differently. The following tips, however, should prove useful to everyone.

### **DO:**

- **Stay calm.** When an accident occurs, a good leader will approach the situation as calmly and efficiently as possible. The expertise and training in first-aid/mountain medicine skills will be apparent, which will be comforting to the injured participant. If the leader is calm and logical, the victim will have a feeling that the situation is in hand, and in good hands. The moral here is to have the appropriate amount of first aid/mountaineering medicine skills necessary for the trip you are leading. This will allow a confident and quiet approach.
- **Pay attention to the injured person.** In addition to being calm, the leader must present an empathetic/sympathetic personality. The use of calming words and a concern for the injured person's comfort and mental well-being are mandatory. Generally speaking, you should not leave the victim alone. Explain the details of what is being done and describe any evacuation procedures or other measures you are taking to summon help. Assure the patient that his or her gear will be well taken care of if he or she is to be evacuated.
- **Remember the relatives.** It is also important to be considerate of any relatives or friends of the patient who may be present, and to keep them informed about what is going on.
- **Keep written records.** Keep a written log regarding the injury and treatment so that this can accompany the patient if an evacuation is necessary. The doctors at the medical facility will be grateful for this information and it also will be helpful when preparing the accident report. Also be sure to send along any information you have regarding allergies or other medical needs that you received from the trip participant prior to the outing. If you didn't get this information ahead of time, get as many details as you can from the injured person after the accident.

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- **Send someone out with the injured person.** Unless the victim is evacuated by professionals, be sure he or she is accompanied to the final destination for treatment by a member of the trip staff or responsible volunteer. As leader you have a responsibility toward the other participants to continue the trip, assuming the welfare of the injured person can be taken care of in some manner.
- **Maintain communication after the trip.** If the participant has been evacuated and is in a hospital, visit the injured person at the end of the trip and offer assistance as possible. Be sure that diligent attempts have been made to contact the participant's relatives or friends who will assume responsibility after your departure. Upon returning home, remain in contact with the injured participant, so that he or she understands that you care about their welfare and their recovery. These final steps are very important.

### **DON'T:**

- **Don't volunteer opinions regarding the cause of the accident to the patient or anyone else.** Complete the accident report and transmit it in accordance with its instructions. During World War II it was said that "loose lips sink ships;" and the same is true with claims prevention. Do not make statements that later could be deemed admissions against the Sierra Club's interest.
- **Don't cancel the outing if it reasonably can be continued in light of the accident.** You do have a responsibility to the other trip members to fulfill their expectations.
- **Don't attempt medical procedures or treatment that is beyond your expertise.** Some procedures should only be performed by a nurse or doctor. Do utilize any medical expertise or training which may be present among the trip members.
- **Don't expose yourself to the risk of a claim of sexual harassment.** When working on a member of the opposite sex, try to have a witness of the patient's sex to avoid claims of improper touching, etc. Respect the victim's privacy, but recognize that sometimes performing appropriate medical treatment will require removal of clothing, elimination of fluids and waste and other intimate actions. Try to obtain the victim's consent before dealing with such sensitive problems.
- **Don't tell the victim that the accident was his or her fault.** Don't make any deprecating remarks or imply that he or she was clumsy or otherwise inadequate. Do sympathize with his or her plight.
- Perhaps the best way to approach the bedside manner question in your own mind is to put yourself in the place of an injured person and recall the kind of conduct that would make you feel good as opposed to apprehensive, frightened, or possibly angry. It is very helpful to discuss this subject in a meeting with other leaders, preferably of both sexes. The more you are aware of the importance of your bedside manner, the easier it will be for you to put it to use in the stressful situation of dealing with an injury on one of your trips.