RoSPA
The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

Water Safety Information

June 2000

Ice Safety

In the last five years at least twenty people have drowned after falling through ice into water, while many others have had to be rescued and revived.

Looking at past incidents it appears that the individuals most at risk are young children and males of any age.

Children are obviously attracted to frozen lakes and canals as they present natural ice skating opportunities. However, over 50 per cent of ice related drownings involved an attempted rescue of another person or a dog.

In many instances the dog managed to scramble ashore unaided while the owner did not. It is therefore prudent not to throw sticks or balls for dogs near frozen water and if they do get into trouble, not to attempt to rescue them by venturing onto the ice!

Avoiding Tragedies

What can those responsible for bodies of water susceptible to freezing do to avoid such tragedies occurring on their waters during the winter? The following measures should help reduce the risks to members of the public.

- ***Publicity and education -*** Use the local media to launch an education campaign on the dangers of frozen water. If resources allow, circulate leaflets or fliers to residents in areas close to water bodies. (These may be included in local papers to save on distribution costs.)
- ***Information*** - Provide users with information at the site of the hazard. Position 'Danger Thin Ice' signs to British Standard colour and format at the site itself.

  Signage is best placed at appropriate points, such as main access points or areas of the water body where access to the ice is particularly easy or commonplace.
- ***Signs***
  Signs should be temporary, being erected when ice is present and removed when it thaws, otherwise they will become ineffective and may even be counter-productive.
- ***Supervision*** - increase levels of supervision such as park rangers during cold periods.
- ***Beware ice breaking*** - This is an activity carried out by some authorities where the edge of the ice is broken to try to deter people from walking on it. Those breaking the ice may be put at risk and the broken area makes the rest of the ice less stable, so if people do venture onto it they are at greater risk of falling in.

Firstly, in carrying out ice breaking, employees are likely to be put at increased risk of falling through the ice; secondly, if snow falls after ice has been broken, children may cross the trench unaware that the ice has been made less stable; and finally a determined 'ice skater' will inevitably find a way across the broken perimeter and will then be at greater risk of falling through the ice due to the increased instability of the ice layer.

RoSPA therefore generally recommends against the practice of ice breaking unless other considerations, for example environmental or operational requirements, determine otherwise. In these circumstances additional measures will be necessary to reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

Although the message should be getting through to people that the only way to stay safe near frozen water is to **KEEP OFF**, every year individuals repeatedly dice with death and venture out onto frozen lakes, canals and other areas of inland water. The inevitable result is that some fall through or become stranded on islands unable to return to safety. So what action should be taken in these circumstances to assist the casualty without putting the rescuer at risk?

1. Call for assistance from the emergency services.

2. Do not attempt to go out onto the ice yourself.

3. Instruct the casualty to keep still to maintain heat and energy.

4. Try to find something that will extend your reach, such as a rope, pole, branch or item of clothing. Throw this or reach out to the casualty with it. Then, making sure you are stable on the bank, by lying down or getting someone to hold onto you, attempt to pull the person to the shore. It is advisable for staff who are working at such sites to carry with them (or in their vehicle) a throw line for this purpose.

5. If you cannot find something with which to perform a reach or throw rescue, try to find something which will float to throw or push out to them. This will help to keep the casualty afloat until assistance arrives.

6. Through your rescue **KEEP OFF THE ICE**, continue to reassure the casualty and keep them talking until help arrives.

7. If the rescue is successful the casualty will need to be kept warm and treated for shock. All casualties should be taken to hospital even if they appear to be unaffected by their ordeal.