BRITISH ROWING

# Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

## March 2023

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TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

## Another collapse following the completion of a head race

The stroke of a masters 2x collapsed after crossing the finishing line of a head race. Fortunately, this position was close to the slipway of the local rowing club and the rower at bow was able to row the boat about 150 metres to the slipway.

Spectators, including members from other competing rowing clubs, noticed the incident on the water and raised the alarm with a shore marshal who had not witnessed the incident. Contact was quickly made via mobile phone with race control, and other onlookers quickly called 999 to request assistance from the emergency services.

One person ran to the scene and started to try to deliver CPR while the casualty was still in the boat. This was not effective as the boat did not provide a solid platform. The casualty was quickly transferred to the bank and CPR resumed.

The person delivering CPR has since reported that "*Once we had got him onto the slipway, I continued with the chest compressions and a colleague was administering the breathes. I had done a couple of cycles of CPR before the First Aiders arrived with the AED. Whilst doing the compressions, I felt his ribs break under my hands. First Aiders came and worked around me, trying to stick on the defib pads and cut his clothing off. They administered the first defib shock and I continued with CPR with the colleague until the AED was ready to deliver another shock. At this point, the casualty was bleeding from his mouth and agonal gasping.* "

There is information on Agonal gasping here.

The casualty was subsequently taken by Ambulance to hospital and treated in Intensive Care. He was subsequently transferred to a hospital close to his home.

It is understood that his recovery continues and he is thinking about returning to rowing although this may take a considerable time.

The general advice if someone collapses in a boat is for the rest of the crew to row the boat to the nearest point on land where the person who collapsed can be removed from the boat and placed on their back on land so that a primary survey can be completed and, if necessary, CPR can be delivered without delay.

This is described in detail in the Safety Alert, "What to do if someone collapses in a boat" here.

If there is a safety launch in the vicinity and the boat containing the casualty is making good progress to a place where the casualty can be taken ashore then the safety launch should simply marshal other crews away so that they do not delay the boat with the casualty.

If a rower in a 1x collapses then the rowing boat should be towed, or taken, to the nearest point where the casualty can be landed, by the fastest possible means.

Transferring an unconscious casualty from a rowing boat to a launch should only be attempted if the launch is of a suitable design and if it has sufficient trained crew.

Rowers should be strongly discouraged from lying back in a boat as if they had collapsed (if they have not, in fact, collapsed) as this will raise the alarm and may distract rescue crews so that they are unable to support a rower in real distress.

# Incidents Reported in March

### Take care to protect your feet

A rower wearing "flip-flops" ("sliders") stood on a nail when walking up the beach to the boathouse. The nail penetrated her footwear and went into the foot. The club was unable to bandage the wound as they could not remove the footwear. They received medical advice to not remove the nail from the foot. The club called 999 and the nail was removed with the rower under gas and air. An injection may be required as the nail was rusty.

Please take care to ensure that rowers wear appropriate footwear with protective soles. "Wellies" are preferred to "flip flops".

### Take care around sailing dinghies

There was a near miss when three sailing dinghies crossed to the wrong site of the river forcing a 1x into the bank. Sailors "know" that on the water, power gives way to sail. What they may not know is that, according to the COLREGs, a rowing boat is not "under power" because it is not "propelled by machinery".

If your club rows at a location where there is a risk of an incident with a sailing dinghy then please talk to the sailing club and agree a plan to keep everyone safe.

### Stay away from the middle of the waterway

There continue to be mid-waterway, head on collisions, often at bends or places where careful steering is required. Please take more care to:-

- Keep a good lookout, on both sides of your boat
- Wear hi-vis above the waist to make it easier for others to see you
- Check that your lights are working (at night or in reduced visibility)
- Steer with extra care

It was suggested in one report that crews should wear hi-vis tops. This is only effective if crews keep a good lookout.

In one incident, a 2- had completed a race piece and were paddling light when an 8 came around the corner, the cox reported afterwards that they were unable to see the 2- due to the bend in the river. There was a slight collision between the two crews but there were no injuries and neither crews capsized

Please encourage crews to keep a good lookout and if coxes or steers do not know what is ahead then they should stop, or at the very least slow down. It is not safe to continue at any speed not knowing what is ahead.

### Take care to check heel restraints

There was a report on inadequate heel restraints. Heel restraints serve a vital purpose and if they are ineffective then the consequences, in the event of a capsize, can be serious. Please teach your rowers to check them before every outing and to not take a boat afloat unless it has effective heel restraints.

### Take care to turn the lights on

An 8+, accompanied by a launch, had no stern light on. When the CRSA of another club asked the crew why they were rowing away from their club, in the dark, with no light, the cox reached around and turned a light on behind their back.

There was another incident involving a collision in poor visibility when one boat did not have lights.

Please ensure that your lights are turned on when needed and, when coaching, please check that each of your crews is showing the correct lights.

### Take care on land too

A rower tried to access gardens by jumping over a metal railed fence with standard cast spikes at the top of each rail. He impaled his leg on a spike. He was given basic first aid, taken to hospital and admitted overnight.

### Take extra care when steering on unfamiliar waters.

A 4- was damaged at a head race as it was being removed from a shallow patch of mud and reeds. The bow section snapped off and the boat took on water.

The crew were rescued by a launch that also towed the boat back to the landing.

### Keep a good lookout ahead even if it is raining

A coaching launch collided with the stern of a stationary Police Launch that was holding station mid river. It was raining hard and the helm and passenger had both put up their hoods and neither saw the police boat until they hit it.

The Police exchanged details with helm and passenger and landed to assess any injuries.

### Try to avoid anchoring in a fairway

A coaching launch was anchored in a fairway causing an obstruction. Two 4-s did not realise that the launch was anchored and rowed directly towards it, they were line-a-stern. The crew of the launch saw them and shouted. Eventually the first 4- became aware and was travelling slowly by the time its bow bumped the stern of the launch. The second crew stopped at the same time.

Please avoid unnecessary anchoring in a fairway at any time and avoid anchoring anywhere when it is busy or congested. If you have to anchor (perhaps due to engine problems) then ensure that there is someone keeping a lookout astern at all times. Have an effective audible warning ready for immediate use.

### Take care to carry a mobile phone in a waterproof pouch tied to a person

A Kayaker strayed from the conventional side of the river and paddled into the path of a 1x without giving a verbal warning. There was a collision and the kayaker capsized. The Kayaker was unable to get back into the kayak, so the sculler escorted her to the nearest safe point to exit on the riverbank. The Kayaker was not injured, but her mobile phone fell into the river and was irreparably damaged. The phone was not contained in a waterproof pouch.

### Take care when tying a boat to a roof rack

The front boat tie holding the 1x on the roof rack unravelled while driving and was caught under a wheel. This resulted in the 1x being snapped in half. The value of the damage was £10,000.

### Take care of your crew mates if they faint

A rower with a pre-existing blood pressure condition fainted, falling backwards into the boat shortly after crossing the finish line. The other rowers in the boat had just easied, and knew of her condition and the necessary measures. The rower in front of her held her feet up at shoulder height, and the rower behind her timed the faint and made sure her head was cushioned. The cox had the crew sit the boat and called for the race medics, who approached in a safety launch. The collapsed rower was regaining consciousness, and spoke with the medics, who checked her and acknowledged that the faint was not caused by the race or any other serious concerns, and that the rower would just need to sit for a few minutes.

The rower asked to remain in the 8+ rather than board the launch; she was given a life jacket and sat stationary while the stern four rowed the 500m back to the boathouse, with the launch following. Once the boat had landed, she was checked again by the medics, given an electrolyte drink, and cleared.

The ‘retrieval’ of the rower in the boat by the stern four, rather than trying to off-load her into the medical boat, is the recommended action and should be commended.

In another incident, a rower in a 4+ collapsed after a 700m piece at the end of a session. He fell backwards and didn't fall in the water but was unconscious. Luckily the crew was only around 100m from the landing stage. The boat was landed the collapsed rower was lifted out. He was in and out of consciousness, dazed and confused. First Aid was administered with guidance from a paramedic on the phone (a member's wife), they advised that the club call an ambulance. The rower was taken into the club to keep warm. The paramedics completed checks and took him to hospital. He has been seeking help from his GP.

This is a good example of the crew reacting sensibly – rowing him to the landing stage, safe extraction, calling an ambulance and moving to warm, safe environment.

### Take care when putting a boat on the water

There were several reports in which rowers were injured when placing boats on the water. These can be avoided if coaches and rowers take care to ensure that:-

- There are sufficient people to handle the boat, more than the normal crew may be needed if there are obstructions or if any of the crew have injuries or other limitations.
- The movements are well planned and the commands are clear.
- The commands are issued by one person only and everyone else keeps quiet.
- Everyone listens to the commands and executes them as instructed.
- Rowers are wearing appropriate footwear so that they do not slip or fall.

### That's the way to do it

A 1x and a 4x almost collided and the 1x capsized. The rower in a 1x climbed on top of their upturned boat and was towed back to the pontoon by the 4x.

## Pollution in rivers

There has been concern recently about pollution by sewage flowing into rivers and there have been several recent reported incidents where rowers have suffered harm from polluted water. To some extent this is a seasonal effect due to high rainfall and the consequent overloading of sewage treatment facilities. Open water swimmers are currently campaigning for river pollution to be reduced. The potential impact on them is much greater than it is on us. We try to avoid immersion whereas they seek it.

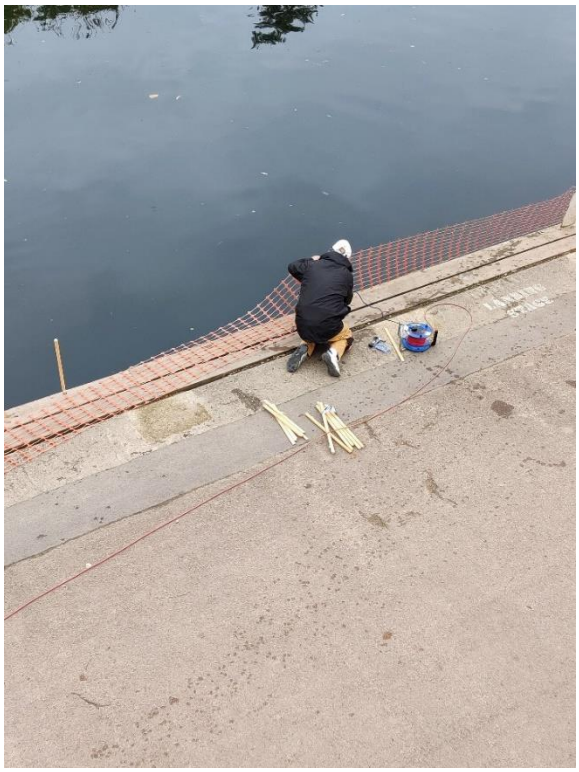
In one incident "Wellies" rubbing on back of a rower's leg caused a wound to open and be exposed to river water. The rower spoke to a GP who sent her immediately to A&E as she was concerned it could be sepsis. The diagnosis was cellulitis and the rower was prescribed fast acting antibiotics.

In the other incident a rower's finger became infected and swollen after rowing at the weekend on a river that was thought to be polluted by sewage. Antibiotics were sought on the following Monday as the finger had not improved.

Rowers should be encouraged to adopt good hygiene practices such as covering cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings and wash any affected areas thoroughly using soap and warm water.

## Birds on Pontoons

Last month I wrote about "Cleaning up after Geese". I subsequently received an email explaining how one club keeps birds off its landing stages and provided the following photos.



The netting is attached to wooden pegs which they slot into the wooden landing stage.

## Does it make sense to Carry AEDs in Launches?

The simple answer is no.

There was an enquiry from one Regional Rowing Council who were thinking of carrying Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) in safety launches at competitions. This followed a request for information on which clubs in the Region have their own AEDs.

The response was that AEDs are not designed to be taken afloat. They may be damaged if carried in a launch.

It was suggested that if some of the clubs bring their AEDs to the competition then the organisers should identify for places where people can be brought ashore and work out where to locate the AEDs on that basis. It would also help if they choose places with ambulance access.

Please don't forget CPR. You will need a sufficient number of people who can do this in relays at least until the AED makes contact with the casualty.

# Lifejackets for Gig rowers

There was some discussion about whether it was more appropriate for gig rowers to wear auto-inflation or manual inflation lifejackets. One of the concerns about auto-inflation lifejackets is that they can cause a rower to be trapped under an inverted boat. It has also been suggested that automatic inflation lifejackets provide better protection against cold water shock.

This is far from easy as there are advantages and disadvantages of both types of lifejacket. There are a couple of other things to consider in relation to auto-inflation lifejackets, they are:-

- they do not inflate instantaneously, it takes a couple of seconds so the protection against the gasp reflex part of cold water shock is limited,
- they can be triggered by getting wet due to the accumulation of splashes of water, so may inflate when not needed.

The one instruction that is important for rowers, is to inflate the lifejacket manually (even if it is auto-inflation) as soon as they know that they are about to enter the water. This requires a little presence of mind. It is therefore important to check each time that the manual inflation toggle is available and not packed inside the lifejacket.

The gasp reflex is triggered by the rate of skin cooling. This is a function of water temperature and the clothing being worn by the rower. If the rower's head is underwater when this gasp occurs then a life threatening quantity of water can be inhaled.

We have all been scared by the effects of entrapment under water since Amy Mulcahy suffered life changing injuries (including brain damage) in Limerick in 2019. She was trapped by her hair when her quad sculling boat hit an obstruction and capsized.

If we think specifically about gig rowing then this issue only relates to the capsize of a gig as there is little or no risk of entrapment if a gig is swamped. Capsize is not common but can have serious consequences because a (wooden) gig does not have sufficient residual buoyancy to support the crew if it is swamped or capsizes, and this can happen a considerable distance from land. This indicates that a lifejacket or other floatation device is required for each member of the crew.

The first action of the cox or leading rower, in the event of a capsize, should be to check that all the crew are on the surface alongside the boat. Their next action, having confirmed the immediate safety of the crew, should be to call for help using a radio or mobile phone in a pouch.

I think that the risk of cold water shock is overestimated. Please understand that we have many capsizes (more than 800 each year) and no reports of cold water shock. Inland water is a few degrees colder than sea water. We train rowers on what to do if they capsize, including to breathe in **before** they enter the water. We have had no reports of the gasp reflex causing harm either.

The one thing we can say for certain is that if a gig capsizes, or is swamped, then wearing either type of lifejacket is better than not wearing a lifejacket.

I still think that wearing a manual inflation lifejacket is marginally safer than wearing an auto-inflation one but would not condemn or criticise anyone who prefers auto-inflation.

# At what age can a child start rowing?

This request came from a Club Welfare Officer at a Gig Club in Cornwall because a parent wanted to know why their eight year old child was not allowed to row. The response that this is the most difficult question I have been asked recently. The temptation for everyone involved in safety is to say "No, you cannot do that"; that would be too easy. The real challenge is to find a safe way in which people can achieve their aspirations. This is often not easy so we have to try harder.

The CPGA Safeguarding Policy is on its website, this has been a Draft since January 2016 It contains the following:-

*Respecting and actively promoting the inclusion of all people regardless of age, gender, sexuality, racial origin, disability, religion or culture....*

British Rowing does not have a minimum age requirement. The Rower Development Guide starts at age 11. Rowers aged 14 or under are expected to scull (two oars each) rather than row (one oar each). If you have no facilities for sculling then the alternative would be for the young person to swap sides during the outing. Outings should be short and not intense.

Rather than deal in generalisations, it would be better to consider this child in isolation. I cannot do that but you can. Issues such as size, maturity and previous athletic experience should also be taken into account. I have coached a nine year old boy who took great enjoyment from his rowing experience.

There is a physiological issue with child development that has to be taken into account. As the young body develops with age, muscle development occurs in advance of skeletal development. In other words the young person develops muscular strength before their bones, and in particular their joints, are able to cope with that strength. This needs careful management to ensure that their rowing skills development is based on technique and not on the application of power.

Please consider which crew it would be best for this young person to row in. In my view, it should be a recreational crew rather than one wishing to compete. If you have a junior or youth crew then this may be best. I know that gender stereotyping should be avoided but, in general, I find that women rowers tend to focus on technique whereas men rowers tend to focus on power. Your young rower may be best in a women's recreational crew.

It would be best to introduce the young person to rowing gradually so for the first few outings they could occupy the pilot seat or sit alongside the cox. When they, and everyone else, is ready then they could try rowing for a few minutes by swapping seats with one of the rowers. Do not forget the need for them to row on different sides. From then on just see how things develop.

It is important that the young person, and any new rower, learns what to do in response to the cox's commands. Watching a crew rowing, in the way just described, will achieve this.

Care will also be needed with boat handling on land. You will have to provide additional help as you cannot expect a young person to lift his or her share of the weight of the boat.

At first, at least, it would be best to row in sheltered waters. Rowing for the first time on the open sea can be pretty scary, even for adults.

Please also work with the parents or carers and ensure that they understand and support the approach that you are taking.

I have not mentioned any safeguarding issues as you, as the CWO, are already aware of any that there may be.

This reply was copied to a colleague responsible for safeguarding within British Rowing who may be able to help further.

There was another enquiry about the minimum age for rowing from a school that is planning a Charity Rowing Fundraiser for Cardiac Risk in the Young (CRY). The Head teacher would like all pupils to row during the last week of term in order to raise funds for this worthwhile charity.

The response was that we do not have a minimum age for rowing so providing you take reasonable care to make this an enjoyable and safe experience then I think you should give even your younger children the chance to experience and enjoy rowing.

There are a few things that you may wish to consider.

- Please use the most stable boats you have for people new to rowing. These should be rigged for sculling (preferably an octuple, if you have one).
- Please select sculls with small diameter handles for use by people with small hands.
- Please reduce the gearing so that the physical stresses on the rowers' bodies will be minimised.
- Please encourage good technique.
- Please limit the time that small people are rowing; stop well before they cease to enjoy the experience.
- Please ensure that they are dressed to suit the conditions.

## Check that your trailer is safe, well before you use it

Between 2019 and 2021 the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) checked 3,083 non-testable trailers (those not covered by MoT tests), not including caravans. Of these 50% were non-compliant, and 41% were issued with an immediate prohibition (that is, defects so dangerous that repairs are required before further use of the trailer).

The most common defects related to lamps (36%), running gear (which includes tyres, 21%), and brakes (20%). There is more information here.

Please check that your trailer is safe, well before you use it, so that you will have time to fix it before you take it onto the road.

# Recovering a conscious rower from the water into a launch

There have some discussions on how best to recover a conscious casualty into a launch. We normally advise rowers who capsize to climb on top of their inverted boats as this makes it easier for them to transfer into the launch than it would be if they were bobbing about in the water. I know this works because we have done it.

Some launches carry boarding ladders or strops, these can be very helpful.

There is a video here showing three ways to recover a casualty into a rib with two crew members. In all three examples the casualty is facing the launch.

I asked colleagues at the RNLI for their advice. The RNLI train their crews to position the casualty facing away from the launch and have two members of the lifeboat crew lift the casualty over the side of their inflatable boat.

The advice for solid hulled boats such as "tin fish" is *for a conscious casualty, stop and turn off outboard engine. The launch may need to deploy an anchor. The Anti-Cavitation plate on the outboard might be helpful as a step to allow a person to self-rescue over the transom.*

*In all other cases, the launch should provide the casualty with some method of flotation (life-ring), keep the casualty close and in contact and monitor their condition, call nearby vessels and/or 999 for assistance, and if possible slowly make way to shore/shallows – recognising a moving propeller with a person in the water.*

*If a person in unconscious and in the water – it is an immediate 999 call (Coastguard on the Coast and Tideway), keep their head above the surface even if recovery isn't onboard possible. The Lifeboats we use at Chiswick and Tower are specifically designed with open transoms for this very purpose, and we carry defib, airway suction, drugs, etc to enable immediate life support.*

These methods will work for single crewed launches. If there are two crew members in the launch then it may be possible to provide more support to the casualty but please remember the stability limitations of the launch. It does not help if the crew and the casualty are on the same side of the launch and this causes the launch to capsize. Entry to the boat over the transom should always be considered.

There are sometimes alternatives to helping the rower to climb into a launch. It is possible to have the rower sit on their inverted boat, or in the water holding onto their boat, and then tow the boat to the bank. This can be done by driving the launch in reverse so as to keep the propellor away from the casualty. I have done this in the summer when the water was not too cold.

## Backstays

There has been a discussion about the "mandatory use" of backstays following the use of this term in an interesting Incident Report that was quoted *verbatim* in a recent monthly report. The use of backstays on the front two riggers of all rowing boats bigger than 1xs is advised but not mandated.

The backstay Requirement was first stated in an announcement by British Rowing in June 2013. The announcement can be found here.

### Backstay requirements

After a collision between two boats training at speed which resulted in serious injury the Rowing Safety Committee has issued the following advice;

*"The forward port and starboard rigger on all boats, other than single sculls, should be protected by a backstay."*

This advice will be issued as a RowSafe guidance document by the National Rowing Safety Committee (NRSC).

Someone else, who was working on the plans for their competition asked whether the competition should mandate the use of backstays in this way. The response was that the intent of this measure is to reduce the harm caused in a head-on collision where a rower could be hit in the back by the rigger of the "other" boat. The backstay will absorb some of the impact energy and tend to push the boats apart.

It is a matter for each Competition to use its risk assessment to determine whether to include this as a requirement in its local rules. This should be based on the probability of a head-on collision. If you feel that a head-on collision is unlikely then you need not require boats to have backstays in the specified positions. I do not know why some people prefer boats, particularly racing boats, to not have backstays. All the GBRT boats have backstays because it is believed that having them reduces pin deflection and helps the boat to go faster.

At our regatta, our risk assessment tells us that the way we have defined and marked the edges of the course, together with the local rule (now included in the WEARA Rules of Racing) that any crew rowing onto the course and impeding a race, or rowing off the course when racing, will be disqualified, results in there being a low probability of a head-on collision and we do not require backstays to be fitted.

## Rowing with Epilepsy

There has been some confusion because reference has been made to non-British Rowing advice on rowing with epilepsy that refers to the use of lifejackets and rowing in crew boats. There was a comment that this could not be found on the British Rowing website. The reason that it could not be found is simply that it is not there because this is not British Rowing guidance.

The British Rowing guidance in unchanged and can be found here.

The guidance also mentions "*a special individualised risk assessment of the individual and the event*". In my view, this should be based on medical evidence concerning the probability of a seizure and its severity. It should not include "rescue" measures and these may occur too late to be helpful. In my view, again, this risk assessment is only valid if it is approved by the rowers medical specialist.

# First Aid at a Competition

There was another enquiry about the First Aid provision that should be made by a "normal" Competition. There are separate medical requirements for the British Rowing championships. Again this should be defined by considering the Competition Risk Assessment. However, it should be remembered that:-

- Most emergencies in rowing competitions happen on the water – it is therefore critically important to ensure that the safety boats, rescue boats and umpire/official boats are fully briefed on and equipped for an emergency (trauma or medical).
- There should be an action plan for dealing with emergencies on the water, on the course and on land and this should be practised by the emergency medical team(s) each morning before the racing starts.
- Equipment should be adequate to deal with all minor medical incidents but should include an AED (Defibrillator) and all members of the medical team be competent in knowing what equipment is available to them and how to use it.
- The emergency plan should extend to how and when to call for an ambulance (999 call) including all the details of access to the incident site (address of the competition, etc.) and a contact telephone number.
- Any competition medical service must be competent enough to deal with any medical emergency until the ambulance arrives. In the current climate this may be up to 30 minutes. Some large competitions seriously consider whether to have a paramedic ambulance on site (with paramedic attendance, plus equipment and drugs) but remember that the risk level changes if this ambulance leaves site with a life-threatening emergency and may require stopping the competition until it returns.
- The competition does have responsibility for all client groups (rowers, officials, volunteers and spectators) and numbers may require the attendance of an event doctor in addition to a paramedic(s), depending on the level of first aid provision.
- Cardiac resuscitation is at the top end of the risk list and if recognised and handled correctly, can be successful. Fortunately, cardiac arrest (either medical or trauma) is relatively rare in sport and rowing. It is just as important to consider other life-threatening or serious trauma emergencies that are more likely to occur.

## First Aid at a club

There was a request asking for information on the First Aid provision that should be made by a club. The response was that a club should use its risk assessment to determine the appropriate provision (equipment and competencies) for first aid. So, for example, if the club do not have cooking facilities then its first aiders will probably not have to deal with burns.

I would expect that your club's risk assessment will identify hypothermia, cuts and grazes, head injuries and concussion, blunt force trauma (bruising), disinfection and dressing of wounds, and sprains and strains. There may be others. The club should ensure that it is equipped and that its first raiders are competent to deal with these issues. First raiders should also be able to complete a primary survey and know how, and when, to call for help.

In addition, it would be useful for members to be aware of emergency aid and what to do if someone collapses. This would include when and how to deliver CPR and how to use an AED. It is helpful if many people are competent to do perform CPR as doing so is tiring and it is best done in relays. These is advice on how to deal with a collapse afloat in a Safety Alert here.

## Use a Whistle to warn of an impending collision

Many Incident Reports explain that a warning was shouted but there was no response. It is tempting to conclude that an unaided human voice is sometimes not sufficient to alert another crew when it is rowing.

There has been some discussion about the use of whistles, of the type normally fitted to lifejackets, to provide a louder audible warning. Some people report that they already do this. It is therefore suggested that each crew, and each coach, should carry a whistle and use it whenever it is needed to alert another rower or crew whenever appropriate. There was some discussion about coded sound signals but it is considered that any sound made by a whistle would be sufficient to alert other rowers and using different codes for different purposes would only cause confusion.

Suitable whistles are available at low cost (~£1 each, including lanyard, when bought in packs of about 10). Simply search for “emergency whistle”. They can easily be tied to the rower's kit and tucked inside their "vest". Coxes already have them on their lifejackets.