Attention to Detail

While on a recent training excursion to Mexico, I ran into an old friend from Ohio. It had been more than 25 years since we last spoke, but it became obvious to me as we talked that his passion for cave diving had not waned. I could sense his excitement as he described some of their recent adventures diving in Cozumel. He mentioned that he was serving on the executive boards of both the National Speleological Society (NSS) and the Cave Diving Section (CDS) of the NSS, but that even with this time investment in two nonprofits, he and his wife still found lots of time to explore both wet and dry cave systems.

While I have been a certified cave diver since the early 1980s, my experiences are nowhere near that of my old friend and so many others who venture into this unique – and potentially dangerous – underwater world. I still understand that cave diving demands training, experience, confidence and knowledge: familiarity with your equipment, your buddy and yourself. Plus, keep in mind cave diving is not for new divers: it demands a special certification.

Cave diving is also about paying attention to the details of the dive and recognizing early any minor inconveniences that might become problems or a series of problems later. Recreational divers also have a responsibility to themselves and their buddies. They should maintain their skills, further their training, gain more experience and develop confidence in their skills. Just as important is their attention to detail and early recognition of potential concerns – before, during and after dives. This will increase the likelihood that each dive remains accident- and injury-free.

Details of the Dive

Recreational scuba diving is best enjoyed with another person. Buddying up with someone is much more than just gearing up, jumping into the water and hanging out near one another underwater. Buddying up means you're part of a team, not only sharing the experience, but also doing your part to ensure the dive is as safe as possible. Long before they enter the water and then again before they descend, cave divers check and recheck both their own gear and that of their buddy. Even though recreational diving requires you always dive with direct access to the surface, you still need to take the time to assure that you, your equipment and your buddy are ready for the dive.

Before, During and After

Before the dive, pay particular attention to the things you might take for granted or those things you are most familiar with. Before taking the plunge, consider any modifications you may have made to your equipment, even the simplest of adjustments. And just because you're familiar with the adjustment, don't assume your buddy will know you made the modification and will know how to deal with it if something goes amiss underwater.

Once in the water, divers should take make a final mental check of all their systems, including their dive computers, and check with their buddy before descending. During the dive, watch for environmental shifts that may change the dynamic of the dive. Divers may feel that once they make their descent that they are ready for the dive, but environmentally, things can quickly turn for the worse. Current, weather conditions, visibility, all can have a direct affect on your dive. Changes to any of these could change a relatively uneventful dive into something a bit more challenging and something that you and your buddy may be ill-equipped to handle.

Attention to detail also comes into play once your gear has been rinsed and packed away. Consider how you feel; talk with your buddy about how he feels after the dive. You don't want to overreact, but if you

seem out of sorts or have some discomfort, don’t keep it to yourself. Understand that dive injuries, though infrequent, do occur, and that you shouldn’t feel guilty if you experience a problem.

Early Recognition

For divers, symptoms of decompression illness (DCI) are often vague. They can go unrecognized; divers often ignore them or they might dismiss those symptoms as insignificant or unrelated to diving. This often results in delays in treatment. Divers should know the most common symptoms of DCI: altered skin sensation, numbness and tingling, pain, dizziness and vertigo, and difficulty walking. Divers should also know how to respond to these symptoms. Your first call should be to the DAN Diving Emergency Hotline staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. DAN medics are ready to answer your questions, offer guidance on your symptoms and help get you to the most appropriate medical care. DAN training courses are also available to help you better understand what to do if a dive injury should occur.

Injury Assessment

The DAN On-Site Neurological Assessment for Divers course, for instance, focuses on how to obtain essential information about a dive injury that possibly involves neurological deficit. This occurs in approximately two-thirds of all DCI cases. The course underscores what information to relay to emergency medical services and physicians. Information you gather while performing a neurological assessment will help the physician understand the extent of the injury and how it has changed in the time it took to get the injured diver from the dive site to definitive care. Also, completing an on-site neurological assessment may demonstrate to the diver the need for immediate oxygen administration and additional evaluation by a physician.

Learn from Mistakes

Cave divers spend time after each dive discussing what went right underwater, but much discussion addresses the things that didn’t go as expected, so they can be improved on the next dive. Recreational divers should model this behavior and talk with their buddies about the things that might have gone amiss underwater. Too often in the excitement of discussing all the cool things they saw on the dive, recreational divers forget to talk with their buddies about things that may need to improve. This could be something as simple — but hazardous to both the reef and the diver — as not allowing one’s gauges to drag along the reef. Once the dive is over, talk with your buddy about ways the next dive can be even better. Keep in mind three checks: you, your equipment and your buddy.