

Lessons learned when an instructor died whilst preparing a zip wire session

September 2006

Issue

An instructor died while preparing for a zip wire session.

Background

At an outdoor zip wire facility owned by a third party, an instructor arrived early and alone to set up the equipment prior to the arrival of her client. She was wearing a helmet and using her own sit harness together with a chest harness issued with the centre equipment.

She had a written risk assessment for the zip wire activity and had undertaken induction training for the activity some 6 months previously, but it is unclear whether she had led any subsequent sessions. On later inspection, the zip wire and its associated equipment were found to be in good working order.

On arrival at the site, the client found the instructor stationary and suspended about 2m above the ground at the dismount point of the zip wire. It is unclear whether the instructor had intentionally zipped the wire, or whether she had slipped from the platform whilst rigging it. Her sit harness was found on the ground beneath her. It appears that, whilst attempting to escape from the chest harness from which she was suspended, her helmet somehow obstructed her escape. Death occurred primarily through asphyxiation caused by pressure from her helmet strap.

The coroner recorded a verdict of death by misadventure, and accepted that the instructor had made errors on the day which had led to her death in unusual and tragic circumstances.

The lessons

1. An instructor may overlook important safety information or key operational procedures if the time between induction and leading the activity is too great;
2. If a chest and sit harness combination is used for a zip wire (or any other activity), then they must always be linked in a way which prevents the wearer's weight being transferred wholly to the chest harness;
3. Instructors should be aware of the increased risks of travelling a zip wire or similar installation whilst alone;
4. The benefits of setting up and checking equipment before the arrival of clients should be balanced against the increased risks that can arise from lone working.