Scuba diving is one of the world’s most popular adventure activities, with the largest training organization PADI issuing an average of 900,000 diving certificates each year (Professional Association of Diving Instructors [PADI], 2016a). Estimates suggest that there are up to 6 million active divers globally (Diving Equipment and Marketing Association [DEMA], 2017). Participants range from age 12 upwards, with the highest proportion of active divers in the 38–53 years age range. Although there are different views about how many dives per year it takes to be “active,” it is clear that many people only dive on their vacations (Coghlan & Prideaux, 2008; Wilks & Atherton, 1994). In tourist destinations like Queensland, especially on the Great Barrier Reef, up to half of the approximately 1.2 million diving trips and 2.3 million snorkeling trips each year are undertaken by overseas visitors (Ministerial Reference Group, 2011).

Client safety has always been a concern for the dive industry, recognizing that many dive customers may have preexisting health conditions that need to be assessed before they go underwater. For first time divers, those taking an “introductory” or resort scuba experience, there is a standard requirement to complete a medical screening questionnaire that asks candidates “Have you suffered from, or do you now suffer from, any of the following” and a list that includes: asthma or wheezing; fainting, seizures or blackouts; chronic sinus conditions; chest surgery; epilepsy; diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes); heart disease of any kind; collapsed lung (pneumothorax); and ear surgery (PADI, 2010). High blood pressure, alcohol use in the previous 8 hours, and pregnancy are also on the list. If the answer is “yes” to any of the conditions then the instructor seeks medical advice and the candidate is usually referred to a doctor for a dive medical examination to assess their fitness or suitability for diving.

For those divers who already have their open water certification (called a “C” card), if they have not dived in the previous 12 months the instructor will usually ask that they undertake a pool skills assessment. For those who have not dived for 2 years or more a full scuba review program is often required (PADI, 2016b). In both cases a medical screening questionnaire is used to identify any changes in health status and the need to see a doctor for a diving medical examination.

In most countries there is no requirement to see a doctor before undertaking training for an open water certification. However, in Queensland the Safety in Recreational Water Activities (SRWA) Regulation...
conditions may be contraindicated for diving. Regular dive medical examinations are recommended every 5 years for those under 30 years of age, every 3 years for those 30–50 years of age, and every year for divers over 50 years of age (Dive Medicals Online, n.d.).

Dive tourism is a multimillion dollar industry that provides excitement and enjoyment for many people. At the same time, the marine environment can be unforgiving if divers have health issues that are not addressed. Industry screening measures and the requirement that anyone who may be at risk consult a doctor are important measures to ensure people are fit to dive.

References


