



# First Aid

**for Underwater Divers with "Decompression Sickness"**

A collaborative Publication of the  
Sri Lanka Medical Association and the Directorate of  
Health Services of the Sri Lanka Navy

This document has been prepared for the use of SCUBA divers, boatmen and others, including life savers, who may be called upon to care for a diver with Decompression Sickness (bends). It is very important that first aid care should commence as soon as a diving-related condition is suspected — therefore other occupants of the dive boat used by the victim should be familiar with these recommendations.

The only effective recommended treatment for Decompression Sickness is with oxygen at high pressure in a recompression chamber. This form of treatment is available only through the Navy Hospital in Trincomalee. If it is not possible to enter this hospital as soon as possible, patients should be admitted to the nearest hospital for necessary preliminary treatment until arrangements can be made to enter the Navy Hospital.

## FIRST AID FOR DIVERS WITH "DECOMPRESSION SICKNESS"(DCS)

1. Keep lying flat.
2. Recovery position (left lateral) if unconscious.
3. Reassure, encourage to keep calm and still.
4. Protect against cold, remove wet clothes, cover with blanket.
5. Encourage plenty of non-alcoholic fluids by mouth if fully conscious.
6. Carry victim from the boat to shore and keep lying flat.
7. Use a tight-fitting mask to provide 100% oxygen in spells of 20 minutes, with 5 minutes on air in between, starting as soon as possible.
8. Admit to the Navy Hospital, Trincomalee **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Ring 026-7766100** (Navy Hospital) **or 026-7508153** (Diving Unit) to arrange admission for recompression chamber treatment.
9. Otherwise, admit to a nearby hospital and inform the doctor and hospital staff that symptoms are likely to result from diving too deep for too long. Ask the hospital staff to contact diving medical officer of Sri Lanka Navy.

[A downloadable pdf '*Guide to Management of Decompression Sickness*' - for hospital doctors, is available at <https://slma.lk/guidelines/>]



**DO NOT ADMINISTER OXYGEN UNDERWATER BELOW 9 METERS**

Hospital treatment while awaiting high pressure oxygen therapy consists of: insertion of a urinary catheter if the patient is unable to pass urine, administering intravenous saline and continuing oxygen through a tight-fitting (anaesthetic type) face-mask — in periods of 20 minutes O<sub>2</sub> interrupted by 5 minutes breathing air.

**Someone who can describe the dive profile — number of cylinders used, duration at bottom, surface intervals — and time interval between surfacing and onset of symptoms as well as what was done afterwards should accompany the patient — especially to the Navy Hospital**

### **Common symptoms of Decompression Sickness (DCS)**

- Joint or back pains
- Numbness in limbs or trunk
- Altered sensation
- Weakness
- Tingling in extremities
- Nausea, Vomiting
- Loss of balance
- Skin rash
- Visual disturbances
- Undue fatigue
- Urinary retention

## **“DCS” HELP HOTLINE**

Need advice? Answers to questions?

Ring one of the following at any time:

Dr. Dinesh Ariyadewa – 076 3061880 / 0718670970

Dr Dhananjana Kodituwakku 0763865784

Dr. Lahiru Nawagamuwa - 0712 424352

Dr. AH Mullegama – 0767517185

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