

TRAINING

Lynn wasn't feeling right, but she always felt better underwater and so kept preparing anyway. She had worked hard to return to diving and wasn't going to let anything stop her. The dive-master briefed the divers about the strong current at depth, and told them to stay close to and behind the wreck. As Lynn swam from the anchor line, she could feel

the current and kicked harder to compensate, but couldn't catch her breath. Then the pain started in her chest.

Lessons for Life

The Diver

Lynn had learned to dive in her 30s. Now, nearly 60, she was still at it; not as active as she once was, but she loved to go diving whenever she could. In the last couple of years, Lynn's health took a turn

for the worse, though. She didn't smoke, exercised regularly and controlled her weight, but she developed a heart condition and had a heart attack. In women, heart disease is often referred to as the "silent killer" — most people think of heart attacks and heart disease as being a male problem, but heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women in the U.S. and is the leading cause of disability in women. Two-thirds of women who have a heart attack fail to make a full recovery.

The Dive

The dive boat moored to a shipwreck off the coast. It was 100 feet to the sand, with the upper structure at around 50 feet. Conditions varied and could change quickly — most of the time, though, the current crossed the wreck from right to left (starboard to port), allowing divers to spend most of their time following the upper decks of the wreck shielded from the current by the wreck's superstructure. Where the mooring ball was connected, Lynn and her dive buddy had to swim about 30 yards against the current to get down behind the wreck. From that point, they could swim easily and ride the current back to the anchor line when it was time to ascend.

The Accident

Two years before, almost to the day, Lynn had a heart attack. This dive trip was her celebration of a return to diving. While she was excited about getting back in the water, she didn't get clearance from her doctor to dive. When she signed the liability release form at the dive shop before the charter boat left the dock, she chose to lie on the form, indicating that she had no medical conditions and was not taking any medications.

As Lynn and her buddy moved away from the anchor line and fought the current to get behind the wreck, Lynn's

breathing became ragged. She couldn't catch her breath and the throbbing feeling in her chest grew. Her buddy passed her as he made his way to the wreck and lost sight of her. She stopped kicking and began floating backward, pushed by the current. Her buddy made it to the wreck and turned to look for Lynn. She was already drifting out of sight. Lynn paid the ultimate price for lying on her form.

Analysis

Fitness for diving is something you need to keep in mind daily. Even if you were once cleared to dive, you might not be truly fit on any given day. Lack of sleep, alcohol use, cold, flu or other issues often can keep us out of the water — or at least should. There are major medical issues, though, that most divers recognize as being contrary to diving.

Years ago, the Recreational Scuba Training Council agreed on a set of medical issues that were called contraindications to diving. These are situations or conditions that, while present, should keep divers out of the water. The release form that every diver signs to begin training and usually to make dives on a charter boat is designed to remind divers of these issues, and signal to the diver that if he has one of these conditions, he will need a doctor's clearance before making that dive. It forces divers to take responsibility for their actions.

Because getting a clearance from a doctor is often time consuming, some divers choose to lie on this form and don't admit to existing medical conditions.

Many times, those divers dive with no problems, leading them to think they're actually healthy — or healthy enough to make the dives they plan to make. Nothing could be further from the truth, and many of these divers are time bombs waiting to explode.

Divers Alert Network reviews dive-fatality cases and publishes an annual accident report free to all divers. DAN has found that the majority of all dive fatalities are caused by divers having heart attacks in the water. While these heart attacks could have happened anywhere, when they happen in the water they are almost certainly fatal. Even when everything goes right, the delay in getting the diver to the surface and onto the boat, out of the gear, and getting CPR or an AED started is usually too much.

Your chance of survival from cardiac arrest drops about 10 percent every minute you don't receive treatment. And that is only when things go right. More often, the diver will lose consciousness underwater. The regulator falls from her mouth and she drowns long before rescuers can provide any care.

In Lynn's case, she should have consulted her doctor for further follow-up and medical clearance. This would have included her undergoing a stress test with her cardiologist that would have shown she had residual problems. There is nothing to keep a diver from returning to diving after a heart attack or cardiac surgery, as long as the diver meets the exercise requirements of the dive and gets the approval of her doctor.

Lying to Dive

Thinking past problems shouldn't keep her out of the water, Lynn lies on the medical clearance to dive ■ ERIC DOUGLAS



MICHAEL MORGENSTERN

Lessons for Life

- 1 Don't lie on your liability release. You are not only putting yourself at greater risk, you are also exposing your buddy and the crew to risk as well. If those divers have to perform a rescue, they are in danger caused by your medical condition.
- 2 Seek medical clearance before diving. If you have a medical condition considered to be a contraindication to diving (see wrstc.com/downloads/RSTCMedStatementGeneric.pdf for a list), you should consult a physician knowledgeable in diving medicine. Without a background or familiarity in diving medicine, physicians have given poor advice without meaning to do so.
- 3 Be fit enough to do the diving you plan to do. Divers don't need to be great swimmers, but a general level of fitness is important so you can respond to situations underwater. When facing a strong, unexpected current or a long swim back to the boat, you shouldn't be struggling to get where you want to be.

Eric Douglas co-authored the book *Scuba Diving Safety*, and has also written a series of dive adventure novels and short stories. Check out his website at booksbyeric.com.

COZUMEL'S Best Dive Packages



Dive Palancar

PADI Gold Palm Operator Located at the Occidental Grand Cozumel. Offering boat departures 4 times daily, NITROX, Video Services, Instruction and Water Sports. Transportation from the Allegro provided as needed.
011-52 (987) 872-9730 ext. 6264
divepal@prodigy.net.mx
www.divepalancarcozumel.com



Dive with Martin & Vacation Connection

4 nights hotel / 3 days diving \$335 pp/do
Small fast boats & SCUBA gear included FREE!
Email us for bulk airfare/hotel packages.
1-888-512-8747 • sburton@airmail.net
Divewithmartin.com
Vacationconnectionrh.com



Dive Paradise and Hotel Cozumel & Resort

Custom packages for divers of all experience levels, starting at only \$355 pp/do for 5 days hotel & 9 dives
011 52 (987) 869-0503
www.diveparadise.com
1-877-454-4355
www.hotelcozumel.com.mx/

Villa Blanca Wall
Paradise Reef
Chankanaab Reef
Tormentos Reef
Yucab La Francesa
Dalila
Palancar Reefs
Columbia Reef
Punta Sur Reef
Villa Wall