

CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

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News of the accident involving the Australian Institute of Sport's (AIS's) Women's Road Cycling team in Germany in July 2005 shocked the Australian community. The cycling team was on a routine training ride when the unthinkable happened, and the team was hit by a car. It was a tragic event, with dire consequences that occurred unexpectedly. No one could have foreseen it, and nothing could have prevented it. That is the nature of a critical incident: it occurs without warning, to anyone, at any time.

While the accident was beyond anyone's control, we should be able to effectively manage the critical incident and subsequent recovery period. Extraordinary assistance and support was immediately provided to the cycling team by the coach, staff and the Australian Embassy. The joint efforts of the Australian Sports Commission, AIS and Cycling Australia ensured that family members and support staff were able to arrive at the hospital in Germany within 48 hours of the accident occurring. The AIS has learned from this experience that a rapid and well-coordinated response to an emergency increases the likelihood of the best possible outcome for all involved.

The AIS Women's Road Cycling team accident reminds us of the crucial need to be prepared for any emergency, particularly when travelling with athletes and teams. You may be required to manage a critical incident involving one person, or many, which may occur at home or overseas. While we hope that we will never again experience a tragedy of this magnitude, it has highlighted the need for all coaches and sporting organisations to prepare for the possibility of a critical incident. Remember, it will happen without warning, so if you have developed critical incident procedures, the long-term consequences of any incident can be minimised.

Be prepared!

The thought of preparing for an emergency may be overwhelming and may seem beyond your resources. However, a simple structure can be established to ensure you and your organisation have a planned response to managing critical incidents. If you are adequately prepared, you will know how to respond appropriately in a crisis situation, and therefore cope effectively.

Develop a critical incident plan

Developing a critical incident plan will provide you and your organisation with guidelines to follow in the event of a critical incident, and ensure you are aware of the required resources.

The critical incident plan should include:

- guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of staff, the organisation and other relevant parties in both the management of the critical incident and the recovery period
- operational procedures to be followed, including:
 - management of both the incident and recovery period
 - provision of medical and psychological support
 - full details of the travel insurance policy

- consideration of policy and legal issues relevant to your organisation and funding bodies
- coordination of media issues.

Prepare adequately for travel

When travelling, you must be prepared to respond quickly to any situation that may arise.

Prior to leaving:

- create an emergency wallet card containing all necessary emergency contact details, such as local emergency and medical services, insurance company, the Australian embassy/consulate and key Australian support contacts
- arrange for mobile phone coverage and access to email, in order to facilitate communication in the ongoing management of a critical incident
- ensure the travel insurance policy is current and comprehensive.

Managing a critical incident

A crisis will demand instant action, and many people may be required to assist. A coordinated and rapid response can be achieved by establishing a critical incident management team to oversee the:

- implementation of the critical incident plan

- immediate deployment of staff to provide support, particularly medical and psychological services
- notification of family members and their travel arrangements
- provision of logistical and administrative support to staff at the site of the emergency.

Priority should be given to the provision of medical and psychological support, ideally within 48 hours of the event. When the incident involves physical injury, it is recommended that a doctor is sent to the site to ensure appropriate medical treatment is being provided. Considerable psychological distress is experienced by all involved in a critical incident. In order to minimise the potential for long-term psychological effects, it is important that a psychologist is available to provide trauma debriefing services to those involved, and to support family members.

Recovery from a critical incident

Effective management of the recovery process is as essential as the management of the incident itself. The ongoing provision of medical and support services should be well coordinated in order to assist in the physical and psychological recovery of those involved. Consideration should also be given to the recovery of staff involved in the critical incident, ensuring they receive support and leave at the conclusion of the event.

Managing a crisis places extreme physical and emotional demands on an individual. If you are in a situation where you are confronted with a critical incident, it is imperative that you have the resources you require to provide a calm and efficient response. The AIS has developed a critical incident checklist to guide the development of your critical incident management plan. Do not assume that it will not happen to you or your organisation, and take action now to prepare.

CRITICAL INCIDENT CHECKLIST

Prior to travel

- Critical incident plan finalised
- Insurance cover confirmed
- Copy of insurance policy provided to the responsible sporting organisation/s
- Emergency wallet card provided to athletes and staff
- Dedicated mobile telephones (and staff roster) organised within the touring party and for those remaining in Australia

Handling of a critical incident

- Critical incident management team established at the 'home base'
- Communication channel between the touring party and 'home base' established
- Initial assessment of medical capability available at the site
- Arrangements made for repatriation
- Transportation of family members to the site
- Decision to deploy staff to the scene
- Decision on the number of psychologists and counsellors required
- Deployment of a medical doctor
- Facilitation of visits by family members once at the scene
- Recommendations on the scope of responsible sporting organisation/s assistance
- Management of media
- Support for staff members
- Implications for insurance policies established

Post-incident

- Assessment of ongoing sports medicine and related support services required
- Leave arrangements for staff and assistance with any increased workload
- Evaluation of procedures provided in response to the incident
- Acknowledgement of assistance and support provided
- Annual review of critical incident plan