



**MEDICAL AND  
HEALTH SCIENCES**

# The Thailand cave rescue

## An anaesthetist's perspective

Simon Mitchell

Bergen November 2025

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No relevant conflicts to disclose



**Fisher & Paykel**  
HEALTHCARE



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**To anesthetize a child for a dive rescue from a flooded cave, which drug would you choose**

- A. Thiopentone
- B. Propofol
- C. Ketamine
- D. Midazolam

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**Prior to Thailand, how many humans had been fully anesthetized before being immersed**

- A. None
- B. One
- C. Three
- D. Ten

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**How many children rescued in Thailand  
required extra doses of anaesthetic drug from  
a cave diver**

- A. One
- B. Four
- C. Nine
- D. All of them

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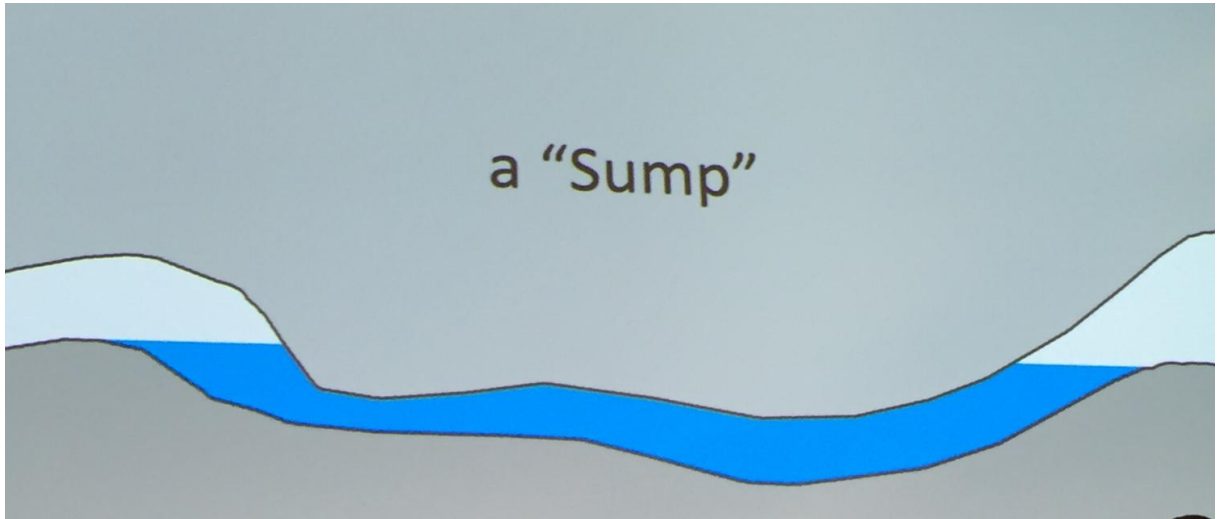
Found after 9 days by  
British cave divers  
Rick Stanton and  
John Volanthen

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## An underrated feat....

The original dive into the chamber  
where the boys were located has  
received inadequate recognition

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**6 sumps from continuous dry cave. Total 1.2 km flooded cave. Longest flooded section 350m**

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## Dive them out under sedation?

**stuff**
world

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**Thai cave rescue involved four more survivors, diver reveals**

James Massola • 11:37, Sep 27 2018



At first the pair – who would be feted around the world four days later when they discovered the missing Thai soccer team – hoped they had found the Wild Boars.

They soon realised they had found four men who had been trapped for at least 24 hours and had not been reported as missing.

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**Richard Harris's initial response was that  
"sedation is not an option"**

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As a general rule it was considered that it would be very difficult to protect and manage the airway in an unresponsive diver for long enough to complete any meaningful decompression stops. Any attempt to do so might result in drowning, which, depending on the amount of omitted decompression, would likely represent a greater threat to life than decompression sickness (DCS) arising from a direct ascent.

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## Recommendations for rescue of a submerged unresponsive compressed-gas diver

**S.J. Mitchell**<sup>1,2</sup>, M.H. Bennett<sup>1,3</sup>, N. Bird<sup>1,4</sup>, D.J. Doolette<sup>1,5</sup>, G.W. Hobbs<sup>1,6,7</sup>, E. Kay<sup>1,8</sup>, R.E. Moon<sup>1,6</sup>, I.S. Neuman<sup>1,9</sup>, R.D. Vann<sup>1,4</sup>, R. Walker<sup>1,6,7</sup>, H.A. Wyatt<sup>1,10</sup>

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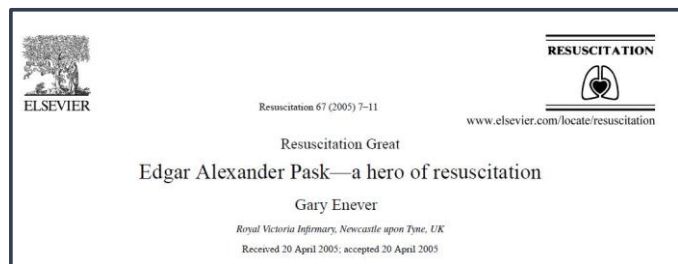
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## Evidence vacuum!

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Anaesthetised and set adrift in a pool, a number of different jackets and suits were tested on Pask, breathing ether through a cuffed Magill tracheal tube via an extremely long co-axial circuit (Fig. 2). The experiments were both traumatic and dramatic. They were filmed, so that they could be shown to aircrew to boost morale and to show that something was being done. After each experiment, Pask was admitted to hospital to recover, and anecdotally he was not very well after each episode, which is hardly surprising. Often he sank completely, greatly increasing the risks of aspirating pool water (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Pask being placed into the pool by professor Macintosh and his team.

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**Richard and Craig arrived 4 days after  
boys found and visited chamber 9**

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**Richard decided he had to do something which  
had never been done, and what people could  
retrospectively judge to be egregiously reckless  
if seen through the lens of drowned children**

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# The difficulty facing Richard

He had to sell a plan that he had little faith in to the Thai authorities

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A classic line trap





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## The anaesthetic

Selection

Fasted

Alprazolam 0.5mg PO

Atropine 20mcg/kg IM

Ketamine 5mg/kg IM + 100-125mg prn

FFM and gas supply (80% O<sub>2</sub>)

Leak test x 3

± positive pressure ventilation!

**Small  
kid**



**Big  
kid**



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**If it was so dangerous, why  
did it work so well?**

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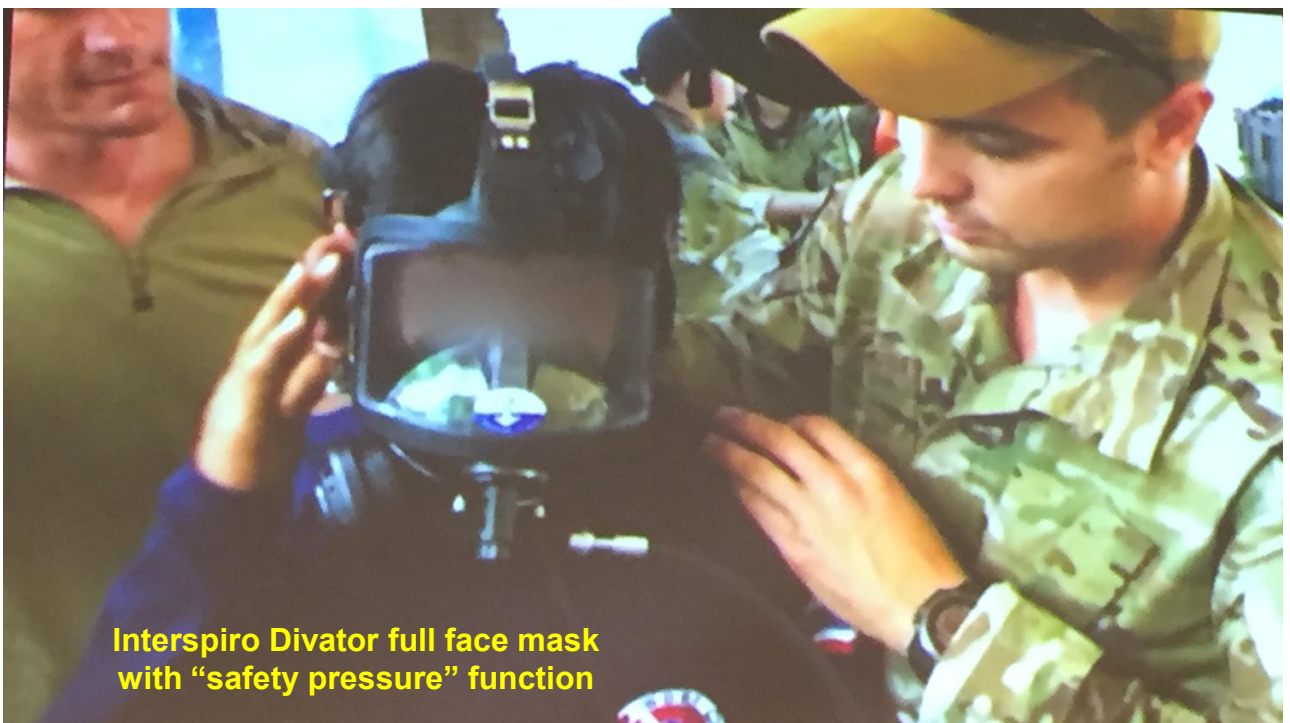
**Choice of anaesthetic**

**Small skinny boys**

**Expertise of British cave divers**

**Choice of full-face mask**

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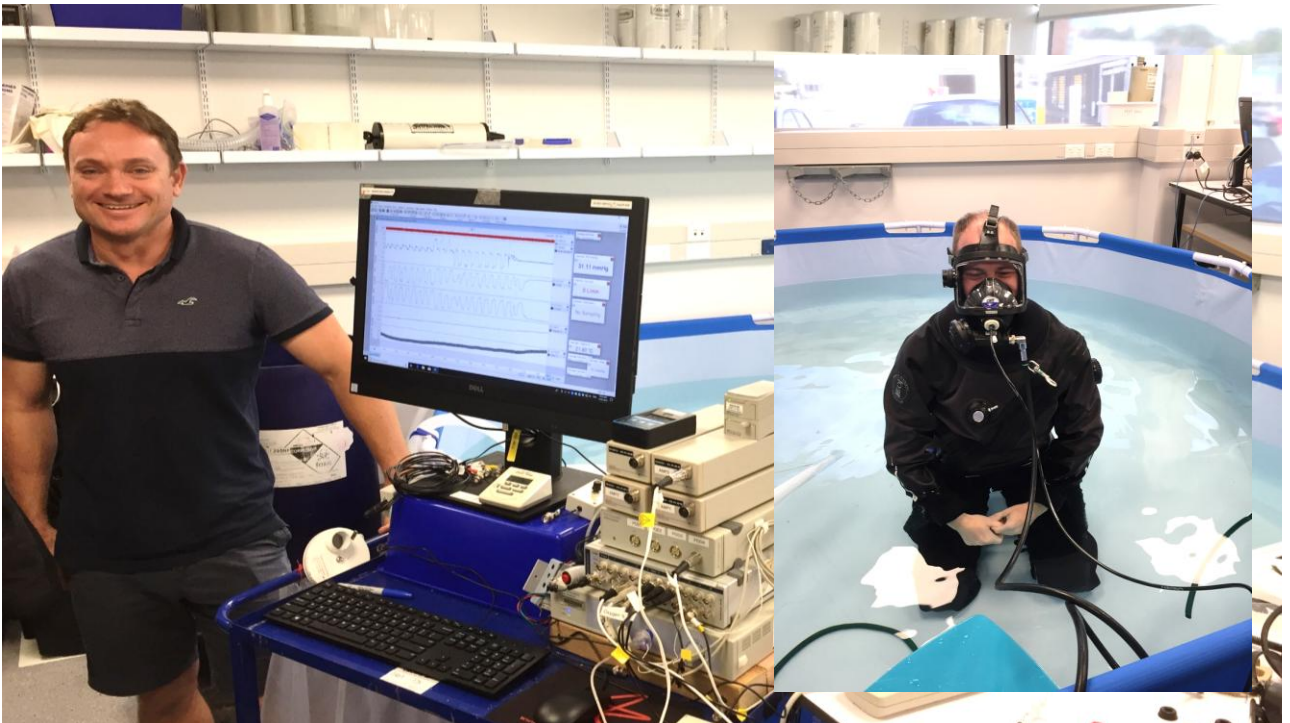


**Interspiro Divator full face mask  
with "safety pressure" function**

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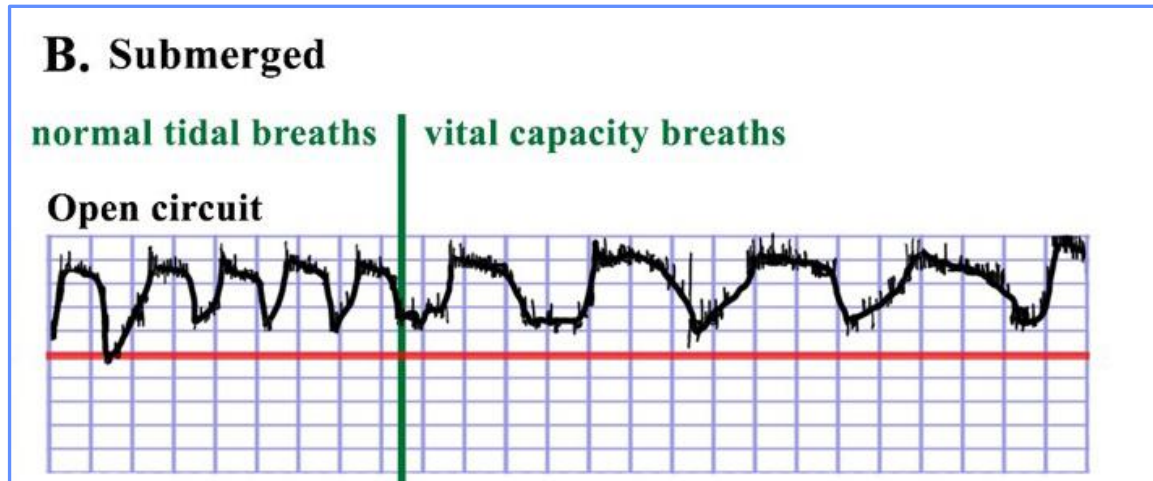


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**Black line: pressure inside mask**

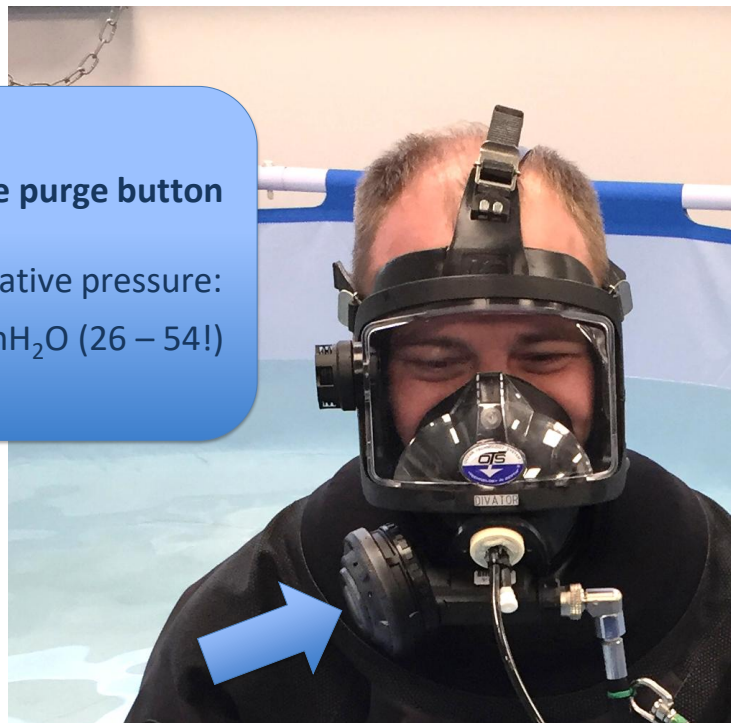
**Red line: surrounding water pressure**

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Pushing the purge button

In-mask relative pressure:

Mean 40cmH<sub>2</sub>O (26 – 54!)



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## Deep anaesthesia: The Thailand cave rescue and its implications for management of the unconscious diver underwater

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7481118/pdf/DHMJ-50-121.pdf>

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