Letter To the Editor: Australian Search Urgency Assessment Form

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Abstract

The Australian Search Urgency Assessment (SUA) form is used by search coordinators as a means of determining the level of response to a Search and Rescue (SAR) incident.

A recent inquest into the death of a young snowboarder and the use of the SUA highlighted the need for this form to be regularly revisited during the search operation, particularly as the situation and circumstances change.

A regular review of the SUA during the incident would have identified the increase in urgency, and subsequent response, as the incident evolved.

KEY WORDS: *Search Urgency Assessment; Search; Resource activation; Urgency*

Background

Throughout Australia land search and rescue is a responsibility of the police in each state/territory, as outlined in Appendix B of the National Search and Rescue Manual (Whitehead. J. 2023). To ensure compliance with this responsibility each police jurisdiction has a section of trained and experienced search coordinators.

The Australian Search Urgency Assessment (SUA) form was initially developed for two purposes: to provide the SAR coordinator with a method of determining the urgency of the SAR incident, and as a driver for the allocation and deployment of SAR resources. The form has undergone several iterations since it was originally adopted by the National Search and Rescue Council in 2008 and was subsequently included in the National Search and Rescue Manual as part of appendix E (Whitehead. J. 2023)

The SUA form is primarily for land based SAR incidents. There is a marine equivalent, but in reality, any incident involving water and vessels could be considered an urgent response due to the limited survivability of people in water.

The current SUA is reproduced below. The form is self-explanatory, with the SAR Coordinator making subjective judgments of the eleven categories based on inquiries made with the missing person's family, friends and colleagues as well as the environment and person knowledge and experience.

Each of the categories is given a score in the right hand column. The total score is added up, providing a guide to the urgency of the situation. The bottom of the form identifies that a score of between 11 and 17 requires an urgent or emergency response. A score of 11 would be the absolute worst case scenario and often relates to missing children, the elderly or those who may be in immediate danger or distress. These people require direct assistance to be located, recovered or both.

A score of 18-27 indicates a measured response, that the target lost person is not in immediate danger or distress but, nonetheless, will need assistance. Based on the scenario, that could be a first light search, a reflex search or a formal search.

A score of 28-39 suggests further evaluation and investigation. These incidents are similar to being overdue from an activity or missing a scheduled communication. The target lost people may not be lost or in need of assistance and may be adequately prepared for that eventuality. Extended communication searches and further information gathering may resolve these types of situations.

It is also very clear at the bottom of the form that if a single '1' is scored in any category it elevates the response to an emergency situation. A quick perusal of the form shows that those sub-categories associated with a score of one all have the potential to put life at risk, hence the increased urgency of the situation.

The Incident:

Kosciusko National Park is approximately 6,900km² in area and is part of the Great Dividing Range that parallels the east coast of Australia. The park straddles the New South Wales and Victorian border and represents the northern limit of the alpine area, being covered with snow for about six months each year.

A young male snowboarder had driven to a carpark in the Kosciusko National Park on a Friday evening in preparation for an early start the following morning. His intentions were to snowboard in the back country of the park and return to his car at the end of the day, Saturday. The 'back country' relates to the remote areas on the western side of the park, a significant distance from the normal ski routes and tracks to Mt Kosciusko. That particular area was basically an escarpment with a variety of chutes and valleys to ski or snowboard down. Once in that area there is no mobile telephone coverage and few other people.

The missing person (MP) was very well equipped for this activity, having good warm clothing with sufficient food and water for the day. He was experienced in the area he was going to, having been there several times before. The MP also carried an avalanche beacon and a Personal Locating Beacon (PLB) in case of emergency. Prior to entering the mobile telephone black spot, the missing person sent a message to his girlfriend. This was the last communication he had. The MP did not

carry any camping equipment as he had no intention of spending the night on the snow fields, in fact he did not like camping out in any environment. The MP failed to return to his car and also failed to make any telephone calls to his mother and girlfriend alerting them to his return, which was his normal practice.

The MP was reported as a missing person on the Saturday evening. After numerous conversations with the family a SUA was completed. The original score was 29, an evaluate and investigate situation, but there was a single category score of '1' because the MP was alone. It subsequently transpired during the evidence given at the Inquest that this SUA was based on the information provided by the family and girlfriend. It was agreed that a score of '29' was appropriate for the activity the MP was undertaking based on the family profile. As a result of this score there was no immediate search activated and further inquiries were made during the following day, Sunday.

The Inquest:

The National Search and Rescue Manual is the single point of reference for search operations throughout Australia. This manual is not only used by Search and Rescue (SAR) Coordinators but is a reference tool regularly consulted by Coroners when investigating unusual or unnatural deaths during SAR incidents. Any amendments to the manual are reviewed to ensure they do not alter or contradict existing content before they are forwarded to the National Search and Rescue Council for adoption in September/October of each year. The updated version of the manual is then published by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority the following February.

Coronial Inquests are held to investigate the circumstances surrounding any unnatural or suspicious death in Australia. The intent of an inquest is to identify a suspect if the death was suspicious or to review legislation, policies and /or procedures relating to the activities being conducted or of any subsequent search. This Inquest was held two years after the event, and took evidence from a variety of witnesses and experts (O'Sullivan, 2024). One aspect that was spotlighted was the delay in commencing a search, and the crux of this was the SUA form.

One of the SUA form's biggest strengths is also its biggest weakness. When initially used the form provides a snapshot of the incident from the point of view of the response. While a situation may remain the same throughout the entire incident it was highlighted during the Inquest that where the situation changes, the SUA form should be revisited and any new score acted upon. In this instance the initial score of '29' was appropriate for the MP's activity, although it could be argued that there were known hazards in the form of crags, hidden obstacles and a steep escarpment in the area the MP was snowboarding.

Because of a lack of either an emergency mobile telephone call or activation of the PLB, the false assumption was made that the MP had decided to camp out overnight. This was despite the mother and girlfriend strongly asserting that the MP never camped out as he did not like to do so. As a result, the opportunity to initiate a first light search was not followed up.

That the MP failed to return to his vehicle that day, had made no mobile telephone communication nor had he activated his PLB changed the complexion of the situation and should have prompted a review of the SUA. It was not known what had happened to the MP to cause him not to return to his car as planned, but there were a number of possible scenarios that could have occurred. The MP may have become lost and unable to return to the carpark or the MP may have had an accident, or worse, that prevented him for activating his PLB. Other scenarios were considered such as camping out, going home with someone else, or making it to another location and staying overnight. These options were put to the family who strenuously identified that they were all out of character for the MP (O'Sullivan. T. 2024).

With the situation changed it would have been opportune to revisit the SUA. At the worst case scenario, it would have identified that the MP was still alone, there were known hazards in the area with the extremely low temperatures and snow/ice, the MP was not adequately clothed for a sub-zero night out and that he did not have shelter or means of constructing it. This would have had the effect of lowering the total SUA score with multiple number '1' scores. This would become an emergent situation, requiring an immediate response.

To temper this, police are all too often faced with family members who either under or over exaggerate a missing persons ability. This has the effect of distorting the missing person profile developed by police and it is often days later that the actualities of the situation become evident. The police are therefore faced with a dilemma of either initiating an unnecessary search or not initiating search when one is needed. It is often all too easy to criticise either action.

It was not until the Sunday night when the MP still had not returned to his car that the situation was deemed urgent. The search in this incident did not actually start until the Monday morning, a further delay of 24 hours. The MP was located by helicopter just before noon. He was in a precarious section of a narrow snow and ice chute. Photographic and video evidence was recorded as a recovery was unable to be performed at that time due to the location and weather. Medical advice suggested that the MP was deceased.

The point being that SAR incidents are often fluid in nature, and as SAR coordinators continually gather information throughout the incident they should also review the SUA form, particularly when things occur that are out of character or were not anticipated and planned for by the missing person.

Conclusion:

In order to provide guidance to SAR Coordinators a recent amendment to the SAU form has been adopted by the National SAR Council. The amendment reminds coordinators to consider the entirety of the incident when making an assessment and to revisit the form at least as often as a review of search areas is undertaken.

With respect to gathering information, police are very adept at this and in criminal matters often rely on body language of a suspect to guide questioning. Within SAR this is no different. The visual and verbal clues given by family and friends can often provide a very good indication of the extent of the worry and concern being felt by the family, and therefore the response required.

Any tool, as is the SUA, is only as good as the user. Continued use of the form will increase experience and boost confidence in its use.

References

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Biography

Retired Senior Sergeant Dr Jim Whitehead APM PhD had been a police officer with the Queensland Police Service for 39 years, 34 of which he has been involved in Search and Rescue (SAR). He was the State Search and Rescue Coordinator & Training Officer being responsible for managing the SAR system in Queensland. In his time he was involved in over 15,000 SAR incidents resulting in over 24,000 lost and missing people being located. He is experienced in both the practicalities and teaching of SAR and holds numerous qualifications in the SAR field. He has taught SAR to police in all Australian States/Territories, New Zealand, Papua-New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Maldives and the Seychelles.

He is currently an expert witness for Coroner's Court with respect to SAR and missing people.

Appendix E-1 Search Urgency Assessment Form:

Search Urgency Assessment

Name of Incident:			No:	
Date Completed:	Time Completed:	Initials:	Incident Date:	
Number of subjects				
1 person			1	
2 people or 3 or more –separated			2	
3 people or more – together			3	
Age				
Very young			1	
Other			2-4	
Very Old			1	
Medical Condition				
Known illness or requires medication			2	
Suspected illness or injury			1	
Healthy			3	
Known frailty			1	
Potential vision impairment			1	
Intent				
Suicidal			1	
No known intent			3	
Absconder from facility			4	
Cognitive Capacity				
Dementia / Alzheimer's /Parkinson's			1	
Capacity of 16 year old or less			1	
Diagnosed mental illness, depression or anxiety			2	
No known capacity issues			3	
Experience profile (See notes)				
Not experienced, not familiar with area			1	
Not experienced – familiar with area			2	
Experienced – not familiar with area			3	
Experienced – familiar with area			4	
Physical Condition				
Unfit			1	
Fit			2	
Very fit			3	
Clothing profile (See notes)				
Inadequate/insufficient			1	
Adequate			2	
Very good			3	
Equipment Profile (See notes)				
Inadequate for activity/environment			1	
Questionable			2	
Adequate			3	
Very Well equipped			4	
Weather profile (See notes)				
Existing Hazardous weather			1	
Hazardous forecast (8 hours or less)			2	
Hazardous forecast (more than 8 hours)			3	
No hazardous weather forecast			4	
Terrain and Hazards profile (See notes)				
Known hazards			1	
Difficult terrain			2	
Few hazards			3	
Easy terrain, no known hazards			4	
11-17 Emergency Response **18-27 Measured response** **28-39 Evaluate & Investigate**				
Note: If **any individual category** above is rated as **ONE (1)**, regardless of its total – the search requires an emergency response until the contrary is proved.				
Remember: the lower the number the more urgent the response!!!				