



AAC Publications

Acute Mountain Sickness

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Disappointment Cleaver

On August 9, Climber 1 (60), Climber 2 (55), and five friends (ages 30 to 40+) from the Wasatch and Potomac Mountain clubs were attempting the Disappointment Cleaver route on Rainier. At 10,080 feet (Camp Muir), two members elected not to attempt the summit. The remaining five began ascending at 11 p.m. At about the 12,300-foot level, Climber 1 and Climber 2 reported feeling sick. After a rest break, Climber 2 felt even sicker.

When checked, Climber 2 was minimally responsive. He was immobile and seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. After a quick assessment, the climbing party prepared to report the climber's condition via inReach. At this point, several guided parties arrived. The guides performed a more complete assessment and radioed the National Park Service. After about 30 minutes, it was decided that two WFR-trained guides would stay with the patient (and the climbing team) and wait for additional help to arrive after dawn.

In the morning, Climber 2 was transported by helicopter long-line to Camp Muir. From there he was helicoptered down to Paradise at 5,400 feet and eventually transferred to the hospital in Puyallup. He had improved rapidly during the helicopter descent and was discharged from the hospital that night without a conclusive diagnosis. The climbing party's working assumption was a case of acute mountain sickness (AMS), lapsing into high altitude cerebral edema (HACE). Their conclusions were based on the nature of the symptoms and rapid improvement with descent.

ANALYSIS

The patient had eaten and drunk fluids normally at Camp Muir before the summit attempt. He had been to 10,000 feet regularly in the Wasatch Mountains without incident but had experienced AMS (though not with this sort of severity) on one occasion at 12,000 feet. Climbing Rainier on a typically fast visitor schedule poses acclimatization problems, since most trips to the mountain start near sea level. The climbing party stated that it would have been desirable to have experience at 13,000 to 14,000 feet prior to attempting Mt. Rainier. However, acute mountain sickness, high altitude pulmonary edema, and HACE can strike even experienced climbers and even at relatively low elevations (roughly 2,500 meters or 8,200 feet above sea level). (Sources: Climber 1 and the Editors.)

Images

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