

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Experience of Safety and Health Promotion in Dolomites Area

Esperienza di promozione della salute e della sicurezza in area dolomitica

Keywords: Public health; alpine refuge; Prevention Department; health promotion; hygienic condition

Abstract

The mountain context represents a suitable setting for promoting health. In view of the Olympic Games, which are expected to take place in the Dolomites area in 2026, the outdoor Alpine environment must continue to meet all the health and safety requirements. Our recent experience, implemented in this area since summer 2024 through the Prevention Department of the Local Health Authority ULSS 1 Dolomiti, aims to encourage multi-sector preventive public health policies, in order to improve the “Shelters” (“rifugi”, in Italian) hygiene, to strengthen the safety requirements, and to implement preventive projects.

Sir:

The Belluno province is predominantly mountainous, consisting of rugged mountains crossed by deep, narrow valleys. Public Health challenges are particularly demanding in this territory, being characterized by large territorial extension, low population density, geomorphological features not easy in some local areas. Therefore, the offer of initiatives proposed both for the population and for businesses operating in this area must be as widespread and targeted as possible. This geographical context is also highly suited to tourism (1,2). Since 2009, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization—UNESCO—proclaimed the Dolomites as a “World Heritage Site”, a natural asset with unique characteristics from a landscape, geology, geomorphology and anthropology viewpoints (3).

Starting from summer 2024, the Local Health Authority ULSS 1 Dolomiti introduced the “Healthy and Safe Refuge”, a project aiming to improve the overall quality of the hygienic requirements, safety, and refuges’ ability to promote health. In addition to the basic technical and hygienic-sanitary prerequisites legally required (4), to be defined as “healthy and safe”, the refuge must enhance the hygienic-sanitary suitability and the health safety, also in collaboration with the Emergency Medical Service – SUEM 118; furthermore, this project is oriented towards health promotion. The involvement of the Association of Alpine Refuge Managers of Veneto Region – AGRAV, and the Italian Alpine Club – CAI, was fundamental to obtaining a good response from the structures for the purposes of joining this project. All requirements declared, in particular those with a direct impact on human health, were evaluated by the Healthcare Workers of the Prevention Department through a dedicated checklist. Moreover, for the purposes of overall monitoring, the application for joining this project must be accompanied by the most recent analytical test report relating to the water intended for human consumption. The main critical issues concerned the microbial water



quality: in 3 out of 27 cases (11.1%), attributable to mountain facilities that did not benefit from public water supply, non-compliances were detected, due to the presence of indicators of slight contamination by Enterobacteriaceae: the immediate corrective actions, which allowed the resolution of all the criticalities, provided for the cleaning of the water tanks and the adoption of a hypochlorite chlorination system, directly managed by the refuge manager after appropriate training (5-7). To date, all 27 refuges joining the project (25% of the mountain facilities potentially eligible for the enrollment in the Dolomites area) benefited from the recognition, having met, at the end of the improvement process, all the requirements.

Targeted territorial public health policies should be oriented to guarantee the minimal requirements in this particular type of buildings, and to improve health promotion projects in an area intrinsically favorable to easily adopt correct healthy choices, including walking and hiking, as well as the incentive to wear appropriate clothing and to use protective sun creams to prevent sunburn and skin melanoma. Therefore, the institutional commitment must lean both towards facilitating the full recruitment of shelters in the provincial area covered by the project and the extension at the regional level and in the territories of neighboring regions. Furthermore, project paths aimed at measuring blood pressure at altitude and supplying telemedicine backpacks have already been initially developed in this setting.

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