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| Everest group leader says he didn't know of dying climber |

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A Mount Everest expedition leader criticized for directing his climbers past a dying British mountaineer said Saturday he did not know anyone was in trouble during his team's ascent, when the man could have been helped.

Russell Brice said he only knew David Sharp was in distress when his team contacted him by radio at his camp during their descent, when they were exhausted and low on oxygen and Sharp's extremities had frozen.

In an e-mailed statement to The Associated Press, Brice contradicted comments by other climbers in his group, who said Brice knew about Sharp on their way up — when they were stronger and better supplied — and told them that nothing could be done.

New Zealand double-amputee Mark Inglis, who was on the expedition, has been harshly criticized after admitting he was one of more than 40 climbers reported to have seen Sharp as he lay dying and who, like almost all the others, continued to the summit of the world's highest mountain without helping.

Sharp, 34, of Guisborough, died in a snow cave 1,000 feet from the peak, apparently from oxygen deprivation suffered during his solo descent.

"At no stage during the ascent did I know that there was a man in trouble," Brice wrote. "There were never any radio conversations concerning the sighting of David Sharp between my team members and myself during the ascent."

The circumstances of Sharp's death have prompted a debate over the ethics of climbing Everest and brought stinging rebukes from Sir Edmund Hillary — the first person to reach Everest's summit, with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay. Hillary said it was "horrifying" that climbers could leave a dying man and proceed toward the summit instead.

Hillary said he would have abandoned his own pioneering climb in 1953 to save another life.

Brice, the head of a Himalayan Experience expedition, was at a camp lower down the mountain while the group, including Inglis, made the climb.

Inglis told Television New Zealand last month that members of his party found Sharp close to death, tried to give him oxygen and sent out a radio distress call before continuing to the summit. Inglis said that when they radioed Brice at base camp he had advised them to carry on with the summit bid without attempting a rescue.

But Brice said Saturday he only learned about Sharp and his condition after his team was descending from the 29,035-foot summit, which they had reached between 6:15 a.m. and 7:03 a.m. on May 15.

"It was not until 9:30 (a.m.) that I first became aware of the existence of David Sharp (although I did not know his name at that stage) when one of the climbers called me to say that there was a big man about to die," Brice wrote in a note titled "Reflections on Everest 2006" that he sent to the AP.

"I established that David was still alive but unconscious and that his arms were frozen to the elbow and his legs were frozen to the knee, and that he had frost bite to the nose. If I had known there was a problem on the way up ... most certainly I would have investigated the chance of a rescue."

Brice also wrote that about two hours after he became aware of Sharp, two Sherpas and a Turkish climber had tried to aid the Briton.

"The fact that (Sherpa) Phurba did not ask for assistance confirmed to me that it was not possible to rescue David," he said.

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