



# Royal Life Saving

NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH



## **DROWNING REPORT 2003**

# THE NSW DROWNING REPORT 2003

## 80 PEOPLE DROWNED IN NSW LAST YEAR!

Welcome to the 2003 NSW Drowning Report compiled by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia NSW Branch (RLS NSW). This report describes all drowning related deaths in NSW between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2003. Information for the report is collected either directly from Coroner offices, through the National Coroners Information System, or via media reports identified by Media Monitors throughout the year. All care is taken to ensure that the results are as accurate as possible as of the end of October 2003; however the numbers may change based on ongoing coronial investigations. It should be noted that these figures do not include other non-drowning aquatic related deaths.

### HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN 2002/03?

80 people drowned in NSW in the financial year 2002/03. The good news is the drowning rate and numbers of people drowning are both down on the five year average, the latter decreasing by 18%. The drowning rate per 100,000 people decreased from the five year average of 1.5 to 1.2, a decrease of 20% (see figure 1). The 2002/03 drowning rate is significantly lower than the previous year's figure of 97. The reduction can be attributed, at least in part, to increased levels of water safety awareness and changes in behaviour through successful education programs and other aquatic safety initiatives.

Whilst the decrease in drownings is indeed pleasing, continued public awareness and education programs are vital to prevent the still unacceptably high number of drownings in NSW.

### THE ZERO DROWNING CHALLENGE



The RLS NSW and the NSW Water Safety Taskforce believes that all drowning deaths are preventable. By building a community that embraces a few simple water safety rules, possesses knowledge and skills that emphasise safe aquatic recreation, and is constantly alert when in, on or around water most water related deaths can be avoided. With another summer of outdoor activities planned and with unusually hot and dry weather forecast Australians will need to be particularly vigilant.

### DROWNING BY SEASON

As expected more people drowned in the warmer months, with the majority of drownings occurring in the summer (38%), and spring (26%). However, vigilance at all times throughout the year is necessary with 21% occurring in winter and 15% in autumn.

### DID YOU KNOW?

In the cost-of-injury study just completed at the NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre it was estimated that the total lifetime cost of all drowning incidents that occurred in 1998-1999 in NSW was \$72 million. This represented an average cost of \$300,000 per injured person. Since 1997 there have been 563 drowning deaths in NSW!

## NSW DROWNINGS DOWN AGAINST 5 YEAR AVERAGE

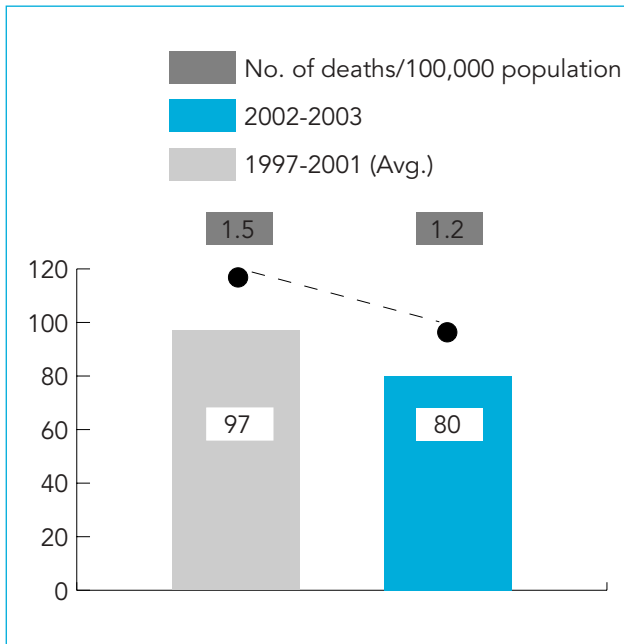


Figure 1 – Unintentional Drowning Deaths and Death Rates, NSW 1997-2001, 2002/03

## RIVERS, OCEANS AND HARBOURS DOMINATE DROWNING DEATHS

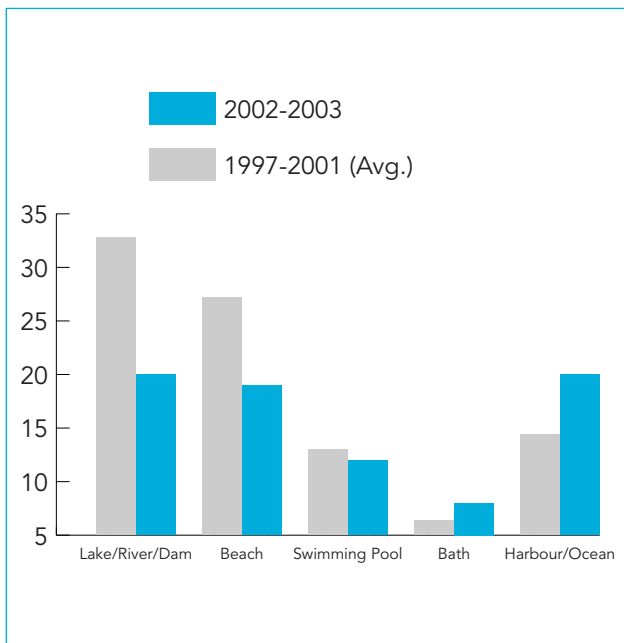


Figure 2 – Water Related Deaths by location

## WHERE ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?



Photograph courtesy of Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation

Drowning in rivers/lakes/dams and beach environments is down on the five year average (see figure 2). The activities people were undertaking before drowning in river/lakes, ocean/harbour locations were generally fishing, walking or playing near the water, boating, diving and swimming.

Whilst the number of river/lake drownings is down against the five year average, 20 deaths is still a major concern for aquatic educators. This may reflect the reduction in available water in rural NSW due to drought, however, drowning in rural waterways continue to be concerning. The flat, calm appearance of lakes and rivers often gives a false impression of tranquillity and safety. When swimming in these locations always swim with a friend and check for hidden hazards and the depth of the water before entering.

Drowning deaths in baths (8) is up on the five year average (6). Three of these deaths were of children under the age of 5. Parents and carers must constantly supervise children at bath time.





Rock fishing deaths accounted for 6 deaths almost half of last year's tragic figure of 11. Beach drownings for 2002/2003 were down on the five year average recording a figure of 19. There was also a large number of watercraft deaths (16) and instances where people were attempting to rescue someone else (2).

There were also a high proportion of swimming pool drowning incidents with 12 deaths recorded in the 2002/03 financial year. Of all people drowning in swimming pools in 2002/03 financial year 33% were aged 0-5 years. Often children in this age group are left unsupervised and the child quickly and quietly finds their way into the pool and drowns.



Remember to directly supervise your child at all times around water. Supervision means to be within arms reach.

### WHO DROWNS IN NSW?

Males represented 81% of drowning victims, making men four times more likely to drown than women. This is consistent with the five year average (79%). All

reported age groups are down compared to the five year average, except the 6-14 years age group which remains constant (see figure 3). The 6-14 years age group total is a timely reminder that participation in programs like Swim & Survive is vitally important in providing our children with swimming and self-survival skills.

The largest decrease was in the 0-5 year's age group, which is down by 39% on the five year average. Significant improvement was also made in the 25- 54 year age group, which are down by 16%. Of concern is the 55+ year's age group which contributed 19 deaths to the NSW total. As the number of people in this age category increases due to the ageing of the baby boomer generation, this category will continue to be a concern unless action is taken.

### HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN EACH STATE IN AUSTRALIA?

Two hundred and fifty people people drowned throughout Australia during 2002/03, and despite increased education, public awareness campaigns and water safety programs, many Australians underestimate or remain unaware of the dangers associated with aquatic recreation. It is alarming that the national trend remains high considering that most of these deaths are preventable (see figure 4).

### WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE PEOPLE UNDERTAKING PRIOR TO DROWNING?

Of the six activities identified, drowning deaths resulting from swimming, falling into water and diving, were down compared to the five year average. Drowning while undertaking watercraft activities, and bath related incidents were all up compared to the five year average (see figure 5). Recreational boaters need to ensure that their craft is seaworthy, weather conditions are safe, that they have sufficient personal flotation devices (PFDs) for all those on

board and carry a location device if going out on open water. They should also make sure somebody knows when they are to return so that authorities can be alerted if the vessel fails to arrive home.

## WHO DROWNS IN NSW?

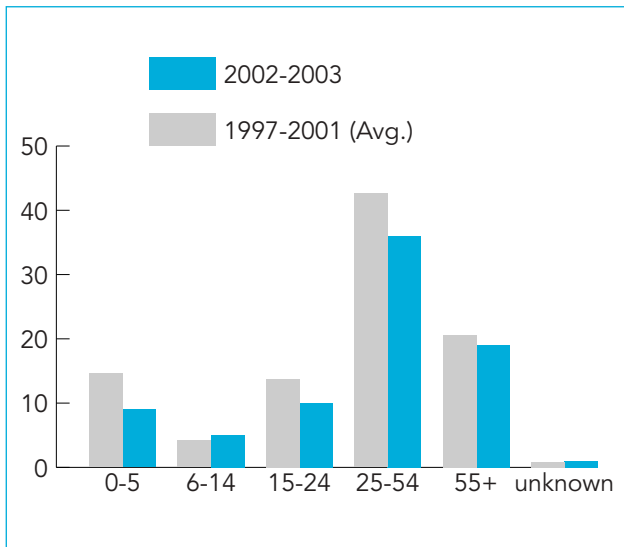


Figure 3 – Preventable Water Related Deaths by Age Group, 1997-2001, 2002/03

## THE NATIONAL FORECAST

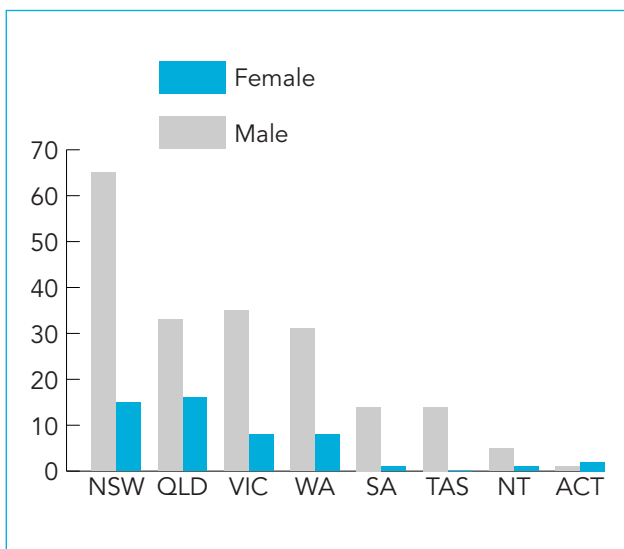


Figure 4 – State Figures with Gender Breakdown, 2002/03

## DROWNING BY ACTIVITY IN NSW

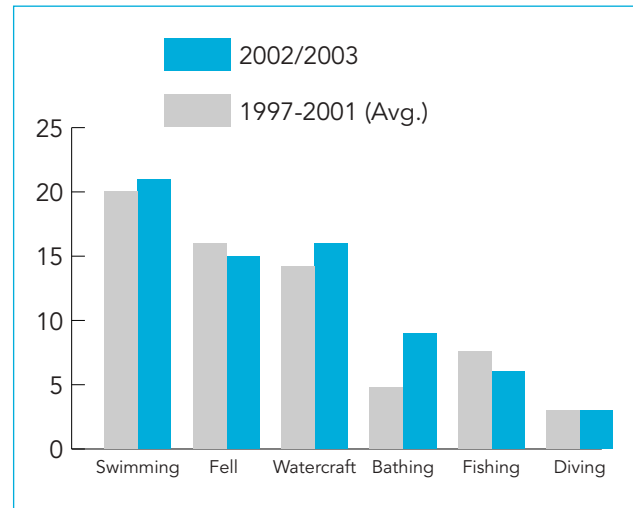


Figure 5 – Water Related Deaths by Activity, 1997-2001, 2002/03



## ALCOHOL AND WATER SAFETY

Alcohol was noted in 27% of adult drownings in 2002/2003, and supports the recent report produced by Driscoll *et al* (2003), which found that alcohol appeared to contribute to 21% of drowning deaths nationally in the 2000/01 financial year. RLSNSW believes that alcohol and water do not mix, if you are unable to drive a car you should not be in, on or near the water. Future programs need to address the issues of alcohol and water safety and Royal Life Saving is keen to progress in this area.

## HOW MANY TODDLERS DROWNED?

Nine children aged 0-5 years drowned in the financial year 2002/03 (see figure 6). The good news is this figure is down by 38% on the five year average (see figure 3). However, 9 preventable drowning deaths are far too many.

Whilst pleased with this reduction, drowning deaths on a year to year basis appear to fluctuate. It is through the assistance of the NSW Water Safety Taskforce that further research has been conducted on this age group with a focus on behavioural characteristics and causal patterns enabling a more targeted approach to drowning prevention for this age group. More work is needed to achieve a consistent year on year reduction in toddler drowning.

The message from Royal Life Saving NSW is that children need to be constantly supervised, need to participate in water familiarisation activities, pool owners must fence their pools and ensure regular maintenance and parents should learn CPR.



Ongoing public awareness and community education programs such as KEEP WATCH and the Community Health Workers' program are vital to reduce the burden of toddler drowning in NSW. Remember KEEP WATCH at all times.

## HOW DID THE TODDLERS ACCESS THE WATER?

Of the 9 toddler drownings 3 were in the bath, and 6 fell into water, 4 of those were in swimming pools, 1 river/lake and 1 a container (see figure 7). All children under the age of 5 years should be actively supervised (i.e. within arms reach) at all times when in, on or near water.

## WHERE DO TODDLERS DROWN?

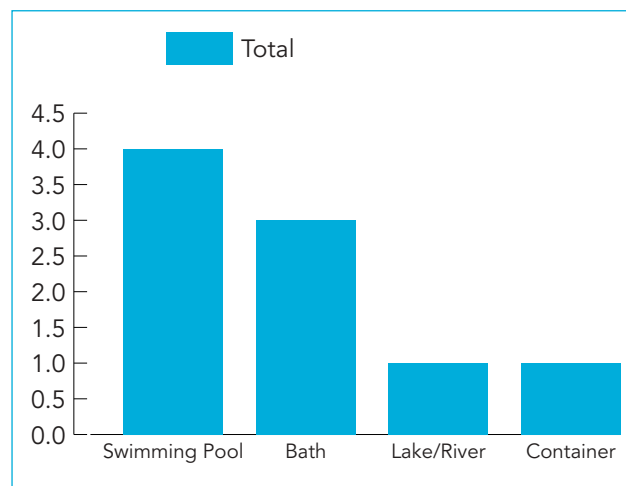


Figure 7 – 0-5 Years Age Group Water Related Deaths by Location, 2002/03

## WHAT PROPORTION OF TODDLERS MAKE UP THE TOTAL DROWNING FIGURE?

Over the period 1997-2001, the 0-5 year's age group represented 15% of the total drowning figure. However, in 2002/03 financial year this has decreased to 11% (see figure 3). The 0-5 year's age group drowning figures continue to be high, and although there has been a decrease there is still a long way to go before the job is complete. The KEEP WATCH message continues to be paramount whenever children are in, on or around water environments.

## IS THERE ANY FURTHER INFORMATION?

Yes, Williamson *et al* (2002) on behalf of the NSW Water Safety Taskforce reported on NSW drowning deaths of children aged five years and under. This report examined drowning deaths in swimming pools, bathtubs and natural bodies of water and identified typical scenarios based on contributing and other pre-existing factors. In all scenarios, lack of direct adult supervision was identified as a contributing factor. Other factors included:



- An unfenced swimming pool or the fence no longer able to keep children out.
- The gate is left open allowing access to the swimming pool.
- Child not wearing safety equipment in swimming pool.
- Child left unattended in the bath.
- Water left in bath and child climbs in.

These findings reinforce the **KEEP WATCH** message.

## TODDLER DROWNING DEATHS

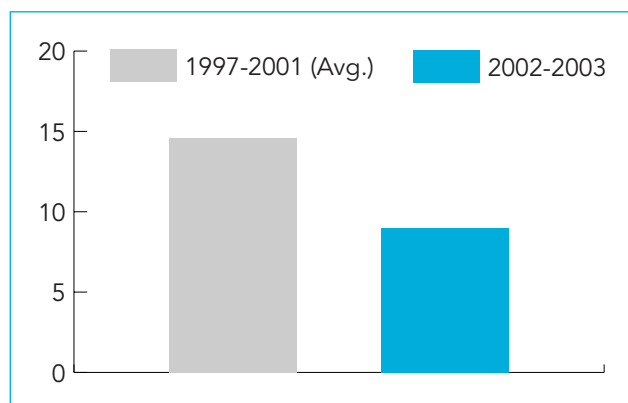


Figure 6 – 0-5 Age Group Water Related Deaths 1997-2001, 2002/03

## ARE YOU INTERESTED IN KNOWING ABOUT GLOBAL DROWNING DEATHS?

The World Health Organisation has recently released “*Facts about Injuries: Drowning*” which examines drowning deaths around the world. The fact sheet can be found at [www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/index.html](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/index.html). The WHO found that there are an estimated 409,272 deaths due to drowning in the world annually, making it the second leading cause of unintentional injury death globally after road traffic injuries. The fact sheet identifies the magnitude of the problem by WHO region, risk factors, prevention and the role of public health.

## METHODS FOR COLLECTING STATISTICS

Information for the drowning report is collected by Royal Life Saving NSW and analysed by the State Office. Information is collected from State Coroner Offices, and the National Coroners Information System (NCIS).

The five year average figures are based on information provided by the ABS and include Accidental Drowning and Water Transport Drowning. The RLSNSW and ABS information does not include suicide, homicide, or natural death (such as heart attack) where known.

### References

1. Driscoll T, Steenkamp M, Harrison J (2003). *Alcohol and Water Safety. National Alcohol Strategy 2001 to 2003-4. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra.*
2. Potter Forbes M, Aisbett C (2003). *Injury Cost! A valuation of the burden of injury in New South Wales 1998-1999. NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre, Sydney.*
3. Williamson A, Irvine P, Sadural S (2002). *NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre. Analysis of drownings involving children aged five years and under in NSW. NSW Water Safety Taskforce, Sydney.*

## WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PREVENTING TODDLERS FROM DROWNING?

The KEEP WATCH website [www.keepwatch.com.au](http://www.keepwatch.com.au) provides information for both parents and community health workers.

## WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PREVENTING DROWNING DEATHS AND WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

The RLSSA website [www.royallifesaving.com.au](http://www.royallifesaving.com.au) provides water safety news and information, details of RLSSA programs and course details.

### RELEVANT RLSSA PROGRAMS



KEEP WATCH is a program developed to raise awareness of the unacceptably high drowning toll for children in the 0-5 years age group.

For further information go to [www.keepwatch.com.au](http://www.keepwatch.com.au)



The Swim and Survive program is a swimming, water safety and survival program targeting children from 5-14 years.

For further information go to [www.swimandsurvive.com](http://www.swimandsurvive.com)

### RLS NSW IS PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY



The Society offers its sincere thanks and appreciation for the support of the New South Wales Government, through its Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation and in particular its Minister, the Honourable Sandra Nori MP.



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