



THE NEW SOUTH WALES DROWNING REPORT 2004



110 PEOPLE DROWNED LAST YEAR

Welcome to the 2004 National Drowning Report compiled by The Royal Life Saving Society Australia NSW Branch.

This report is for the year 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004. Information for this report has primarily been collected through the National Coroners Information System and supplemented with information from Coronial offices and media reports collected throughout the year. All care is taken to ensure that the results are as accurate as possible as of 10 October 2004; however the numbers may change based on ongoing coronial investigations. It should be noted that these figures do not include non-drowning aquatic related deaths.

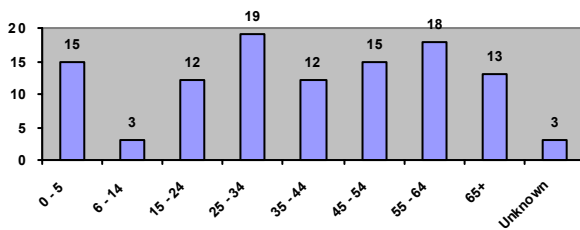
HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN 2003/04?

110 people drowned in NSW in the financial year 2003/04 (Figure 1). This reveals a considerable increase from last year's figures and the five-year average of 89.

The international standard for recording drowning deaths is as a rate per 100,000 of the total population. The NSW population according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics was 6,716,277 to December 2003, which calculates the drowning rate as 1.63 per 100,000. This indicates an increase from the five year average of 1.5 per 100,000.

NSW Drowning by Age Group

Figure 1. Unintentional Drowning Deaths by Age Group, NSW, 2003/2004



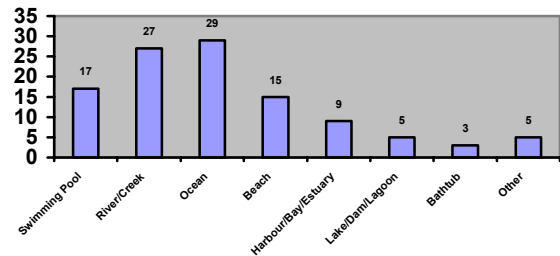
THE CHALLENGE OF PREVENTING DROWNING

We live in a state that enjoys wonderful weather coupled with great access to the many magnificent waterways throughout NSW. Due to a number of factors including increased sunshine and longer days with daylight saving we spend much of our leisure time outdoors and enjoying leisure pursuits. Our coastline has wonderful beaches and inland NSW we have many rivers, lakes and lagoons. Water is vital for our survival and yet it is also fraught with danger if we do

not heed simple water safety rules when enjoying our leisure activities. Royal Life Saving encourages safe aquatic activities - whether at the local aquatic centre, at home or at the river or beach environments. By building a community that embraces a few simple water safety rules, possesses knowledge and skills that emphasise safe aquatic recreation, most water related deaths can be avoided. Remember to be aware of people around you and your environment and be constantly alert when in, on or around water.

Where are People Drowning?

Figure 2. Drowning Deaths by Location, NSW 2003/2004



WHERE ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?

Drowning in the ocean, river/creeks, swimming pools and beaches are the main locations where people are drowning (Figure 2). Drownings in rural waterways continues to be concerning with a slight increase last year (32) compared to the five-year average (30.4) for river/creek and lake/dam/lagoon. When swimming in these locations always swim with a friend and check for hidden hazards and the depth of the water before entering.

There has been an increase in beach, ocean, harbour/bay/estuary drowning deaths (53) where almost half of all drownings occur, compared to the five-year average (39.6). When swimming at a beach always swim between the red and yellow flags, undertake all water related activities with a friend, and if fishing be sure that you use appropriate safety gear.

There has also been an increase in the number of swimming pool drowning deaths (17) compared to the five-year average (10.6). Of those who drowned in swimming pools in 2003/04, 9 (53%) were aged 0-5 years. Children in this age group even if only left briefly unsupervised can quickly and quietly find their way into the pool and drown. Remember to actively supervise (within arms reach) your child at all times.

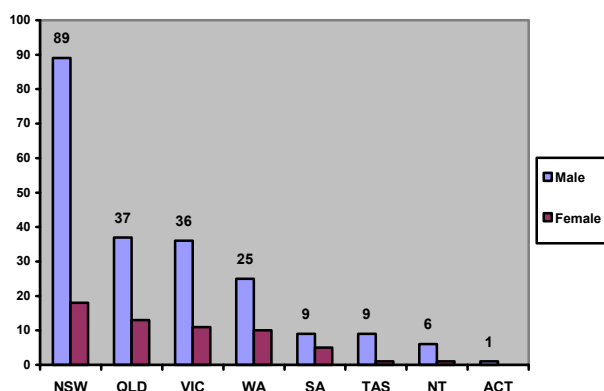
Local councils need to ensure that regular home pool inspections are carried out and pool owners understand and comply with the regulations regarding pool fencing requirements.

Alcohol was noted in a number of adult drownings (7%), if you should not be driving a car you should not be on or in the water. Be aware and Don't Drink and Drown!

WHEN ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?

As expected more people drowned in the warmer months, with the majority of drownings occurring in summer 36%, and 28% occurring in both autumn and spring and 12% during winter. However, vigilance at all times throughout the year is most important as bathtub drownings in the 0-5 year age group are more common in the winter months.

THE NATIONAL DROWNING BURDEN
Figure 3. State Figures with Gender Breakdown, Australia 2003/04



METHODS

Information for the drowning report is collected and analysed by The Royal Life Saving Society's New South Wales Branch and National Office. Information is collected from National Coroner Information System (NCIS), State Coroner's office and media reports. Those using the NCIS apply four searches based on:

1. Mechanism – Threats to Breathing – Drowning and Immersion
2. Key Word “drown” searched for in Findings
3. Key Word “drown” searched for in Police Reports
4. Key Word “drown” searched for in Autopsy reports

To find drowning deaths that are reported to the media, Royal Life Saving uses a media monitoring service. This service uses the key words; drown, drowning, water safety, water rescue, Keep Watch, and Life Saving.

The print media service runs all year and the electronic service during this period started on Tuesday, 23 September 2003 and finished on Monday, 3 May 2004.

Although all care is taken to ensure that the information is as accurate as possible, these figures are considered interim until the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures are released. These figures may change depending upon ongoing coronial investigations and findings. The report contains drowning deaths known at 10 October 2004, any

cases identified after this date are not included. The drowning figures are checked against media reported cases. Due to the way the information is coded by the NCIS we have changed the “swimming” category to “leisure activity and swimming”.

WHO DROWNS IN NSW?

Last year there were 89 (81%) males, 18 (16%) females and 3 (3%) cases where the gender was unknown who drowned, making males about four times more likely to drown than females.

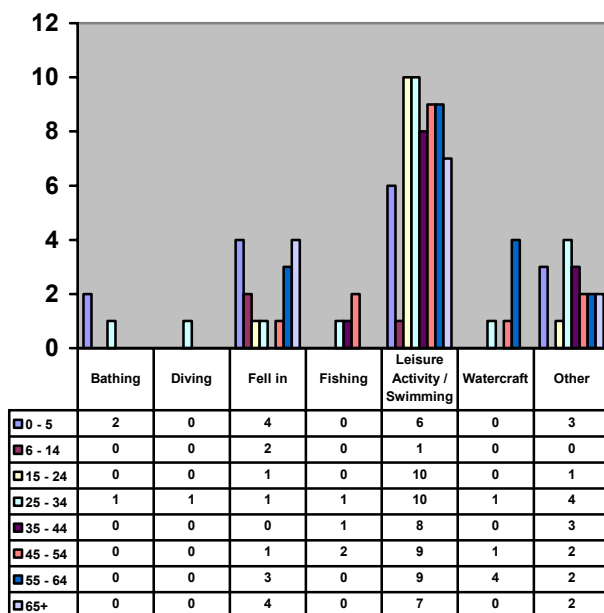
Encouragingly there was a decrease from the five-year average in both the 6-14 and 15-24 years age groups. This may be partly attributed to the Swim and Survive and other Royal Life Saving water safety programs aimed at school aged children. However the increase in all other age groups is concerning.

Further investigation into the causal patterns of drowning in various ages groups is vital in order to target preventative strategies effectively. As more information from coronial records is collected and further analyses undertaken, we will be able to establish causative factors for each age group and plan appropriate interventions.

WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE PEOPLE UNDERTAKING PRIOR TO DROWNING?

Of the six activities identified, drowning deaths resulting from diving, watercraft, fishing, falling into water and bathing were down compared to the five-year average. The increase in the leisure activity/swimming group is related to the use of the National Coroners Information System and the lack of detail available; this is also reflected in the larger number of other/unknown cases (Figure 4).

DROWNING BY ACTIVITY AND AGE
Figure 4. Drowning Deaths by Activity and Age Group, NSW, 2003/2004



THE 0-5 YEAR AGE GROUP

HOW MANY TODDLERS DROWNED?

15 children aged 0-5 years drowned in 2003/04. This is an increase on last year's figures of 9 and an increase on the five year average of 12.4.

Although drowning deaths on a year-to-year basis appear to fluctuate, the increase is a real concern and more work is needed to achieve a consistent reduction in toddler drowning. Royal Life Saving recommends a combination of actions to prevent toddler drowning – constant, active adult supervision (within arms reach of your child) at all times around water, participate in water familiarisation activities, pool owners must fence their pool and keep the gate shut and parents should learn resuscitation.

On rural properties parents should create a 'child safe' area, where the toddler cannot wander away to dams or creeks on the property.

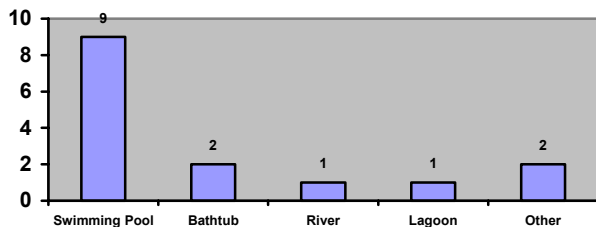
HOW DID THE TODDLERS ACCESS THE WATER?

The majority of toddler drowning deaths resulted from the child being involved in a leisure activity or falling into or wandering into the water. This is often into swimming pools (Figure 5) where access to the pool is not restricted (i.e. the play area and the pool are in the same space) or the gate has been left open. 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?

0-5 YEAR AGE GROUP

Figure 5. Drowning Deaths by Location, NSW 2003/2004



COST OF DROWNING to NSW

There have been three major studies in Australia examining the lifetime cost of a drowning death. The studies show the cost per person for drowning, to range between \$370,000 and \$610,467. With 110 drowning deaths the cost to the NSW economy is between \$40.7 million and \$67.15 million dollars.

CURRENT AND EMERGING ISSUES

Swimming in Dangerous Locations

There have been a number of reports where children have been swimming in unsafe locations such as old quarries and unused industrial areas where abandoned holes have filled

with water. These pose a very real risk of injury, disease and drowning.

Breathe Holding and Hypoxic Blackout

Hypoxic blackout whilst not a new issue, has been highlighted by the NSW Coroner who recently handed down a finding on a healthy teenage male who died while holding his breath while trying to swim as far underwater as possible. Hypoxic blackout is the lack of oxygen to the brain and if this occurs while swimming the person slows down and then loses consciousness.

Parental Perceptions of Early Childhood Water Safety

Recent New Zealand research from Moran, Stanley and Cogan (2004) revealed that the majority of parents who enrol their toddler in lessons did so to increase water safety and water confidence of their child. However the majority of parents believed that the protective effects of learning to swim were the best way to prevent toddler drowning. This is a misconception that protective factors from toddler lessons alone prevent toddler drowning.

Ref: Moran K., Stanley T. & Coggan, C. (2004). *Parental perceptions of toddler water safety*. Unpublished paper presented at the 7th Australian and 2nd Pacific Rim Injury Prevention Conference, 15-17 September, Mackay, Queensland.

Baby Bath Seats

There have been calls for mandatory warning labels on baby bath seats and even banning after reports of a number of drowning and near drowning incidents in children less than two years of age.

Byard and Donald (2004) described the mechanisms that may result in immersion of a child in a bathtub seat. This included the child tipping forward and out of the device or climbing out of the device, which could result in entrapment under the water.

Following a review of these cases, Byard and Donald (2004) argued that carers may feel more confident leaving a child unattended if they are placed in a bathtub seat. It was also argued that warning labels advising against unsupervised use may be ignored.

Byard and Donald (2004) stated that drowning and near-drowning incidents also involved a lack of carer supervision, and concluded that carers' understanding of the need for constant and competent adult supervision was a more important prevention strategy. Children in bath seats must never be left unattended in the bath!

Ref: Byard, R.W. and Donald, T. (2004). Infant bath seats, drowning and near-drowning. *J. Paediatr. Child Health*. Vol. 40: 305-307.



QUICK FACTS on NSW DROWNING 2003/04

Children 0-5 years

- 15 children aged 0-5 years drowned in NSW last year (14% of all drowning deaths)
- 11 were males and 4 were females
- 9 (60%) drowned in home swimming pools
- 4 (27%) fell or wandered into the water prior to drowning

Children 6-14 years

- 3 children aged 6-14 years drowned in NSW last year
- all were males
- The drowning environments included the river/creeks (2) and the ocean (1)

People 15-24

- 12 people aged 15-24 drowned in NSW last year
- 10 males, 2 females
- 8 (67%) drowned in river/creeks
- 10 (83%) were undertaking leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning

People 25-34

- 19 people aged 25-34 drowned in NSW last year
- 17 males, 2 females
- 10 (53%) were undertaking leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning

People 35-44

- 12 people aged 35-44 drowned in NSW last year
- all were males
- 8 (67%) were undertaking leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning

People 45-54

- 15 people aged 45-54 drowned in NSW last year
- 11 males, 4 females
- 9 (60%) were undertaking leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning

People 55-64

- 18 people aged 55-64 drowned in NSW last year
- 15 males, 3 females
- 9 (50%) were undertaking leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning
- 4 (22%) were involved with watercraft
- 3 (17%) fell into the water

People 65+

- 13 people aged 65+ drowned in NSW last year
- 11 males, 2 females
- 7 (54%) were involved in leisure activities or swimming prior to drowning
- 4 (31%) fell into the water

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Royal Life Saving acknowledges the following organisations for their assistance.

- The National Coronial Information System
- State Coroners
- Media Monitors
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia is a National volunteer-based organisation that is dedicated to lifesaving and continually strives to prevent aquatic related injury and death through its training programs, public education, research, aquatic risk management services and international liaisons.

For more information contact:

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia NSW Branch

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Hunter Regional Office	02 4969 6995
Riverina Regional Office	02 6921 7422
Western Regional Office	02 6369 0679
Illawarra Regional Office	02 4272 6131
Northern Regional Office	02 6651 6266

Or go to www.nsw.royallifesaving.com.au

WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY?



The KEEP WATCH program promotes community awareness and understanding of the prevention strategies to reduce the high number of children drowning in the 0-5 years age group. For further information go to www.keepwatch.com.au



Swim and Survive provides a broad, balanced program of swimming, water safety and survival skills in preparation for a lifetime of safe activity in, on or around the water. Swim and Survive develops swimming technique, water safety, water confidence, survival and rescue skills and endurance.

Since 1982 over 10 million Australians have participated in Royal Life Saving's Swim and Survive Program. During this time there has been a 75% reduction in drowning deaths in the 5-14 year age group. Swim and Survive is more than swimming lessons. www.swimandsurvive.com

The Royal Life Saving Society NSW is proudly supported by

