

# DROWNING REPORT 1999

## 305 PEOPLE DROWNED THIS YEAR!

### AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS EDGE DOWNWARDS - AFTER A TRAGIC SUMMER

National trends suggest that 305 people drowned in preventable water related activities for the financial year 1998 - 1999. This figure is down by approximately 6% from the previous year and almost identical to the average of the previous five years. Taking the Australian population growth into consideration, the preventable water-related death rate is 1.6 deaths per 100,000 population which is slightly below the 1993 - 1997 year average. (See Chart 1)

After a tragic summer period where an extraordinary number of deaths by drowning were recorded, (over 30 at surf beaches alone during January and February) there was a steadying of figures due to increased community awareness on aquatic recreational dangers, thus providing a 6% reduction for the 12 month period.

With the approaching 1999 - 2000 summer, continued public awareness is essential to avoid the multiple drownings of last summer.

### LAKES, RIVERS AND DAMS TAKE MOST LIVES - OVERVIEW

1998 - 1999 revealed a significant increase in lake, river, dam and beach drownings. The flat, still appearance of lakes, rivers and dams often gives a false impression. These locations remain the most dangerous when it comes to drowning. 124 deaths were recorded at these locations during the recorded period. (See Chart 2)

The number of beach drownings has again increased and can only be described as the worst in recent history with a total of 67 deaths. This figure represents an increase of 45% on the five year average.

Backyard private swimming pools and bathtubs also showed high proportions of drowning with 41 and 18 recorded respectively. 1998 - 1999 revealed a downward trend in swimming pool drownings when compared to the 5 year average. However these two locations remain the biggest threat to children aged between 0 - 5 years.

### AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS SLIGHTLY DOWN IN 98 - 99

Water-Related Deaths and Death Rates 1993 - 1998/99 All Ages

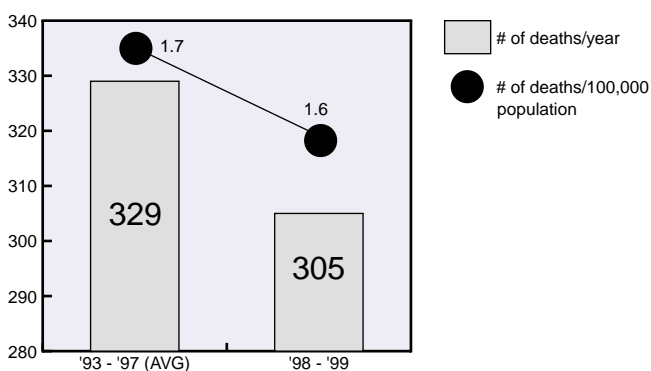


Chart 1

### LAKES, RIVERS & DAMS REMAIN AS NATION'S DROWNING BLACKSPOTS

Water-Related Deaths by Location All Ages

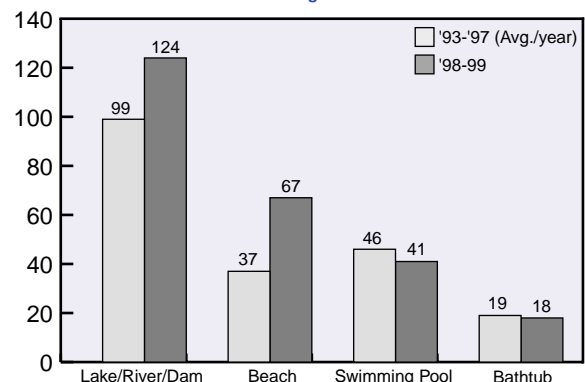


Chart 2

# 0 - 5 OUR NATIONAL DISGRACE

## OUR BABIES CONTINUE TO DROWN

Early indications for 1998 - 1999 suggest that 55 Australian children under 5 years of age died as a result of drowning. (See Chart 3) For every drowning death there were approximately six children admitted to hospital as a result of an immersion incident.

In Australia this equates to about 330 "near-drowned" children. Every one of these immersion incidents is a potential death. Studies have shown that between 5% and 20% of children who are admitted to hospital have suffered some form of brain damage, ranging from mild to severe.

Despite widespread public education programs throughout the media, child care centres and in hospitals, too many children are being lost in preventable water related accidents and a more targeted approach is needed.

## THE HOME CONTINUES TO CLAIM MOST TODDLERS

Backyard swimming pools and bathtubs continue to pose the greatest threat to young lives under five. Based on research patterns since 1993, swimming pools account for 48% of drowning in this age group. (See Chart 4) Research also indicates that the most likely method of entry is direct access due to there being no pool fence.

## DANGERS ON RURAL PROPERTIES SHOULD NOT BE OVERLOOKED

The 0 - 5 figures indicate that 20% of drowning occurs in lakes rivers and dams with 15 such cases recorded in the past year. The importance of supervision and on establishing child safe areas should not be underestimated. (See Chart 4)

### TODDLER DROWNINGS 1998/99

Overview by Location

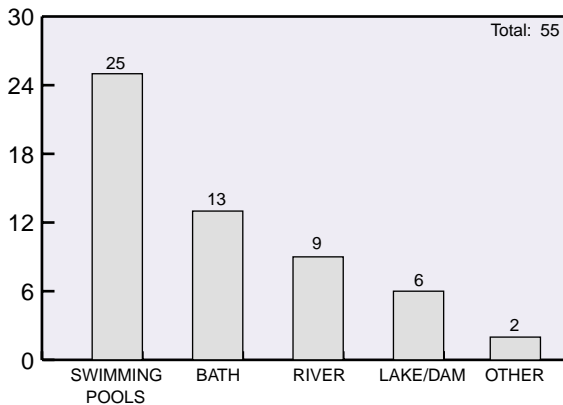


Chart 3

### WHERE THERE IS WATER KIDS DROWN

Water-Related Deaths 0-5 Age Group 1993-1998/99 (%)

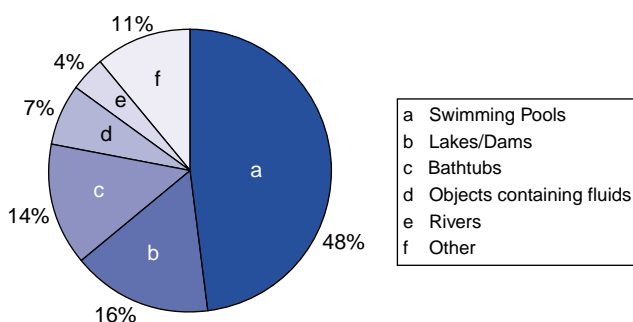


Chart 4

### 0 - 5 FIGURES MAKE UP OVER 20 % OF THE TOTAL DROWNING FIGURE

Over the recorded period, the 0 - 5 figures make up over 20% of the total drowning figure. The 0 -5 figures have long been described as a national disgrace, and have not shown any significant decrease over the past five years. Downward trends were evident in 1993 - 1994, but the following year's figures were again higher. 75% of 0 - 5 drownings result from a child wandering off and falling into the water. This reinforces the message of "KEEP WATCH" whenever children are in, on or around water environments. (See Chart 5)

### TODDLER DROWNINGS A NATIONAL DISGRACE

0-5 Age Group Water-Related Deaths 1993-1998/99

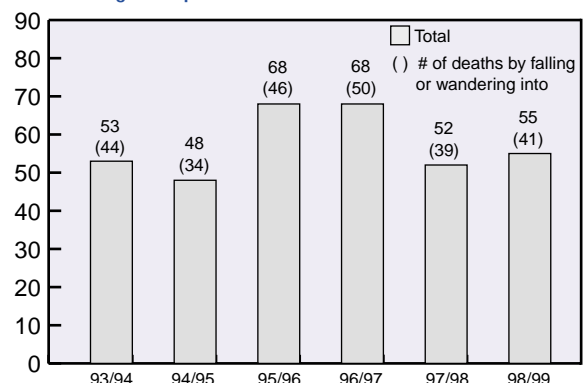


Chart 5

## THE NATIONAL FORECAST

National Figures with State Breakdown

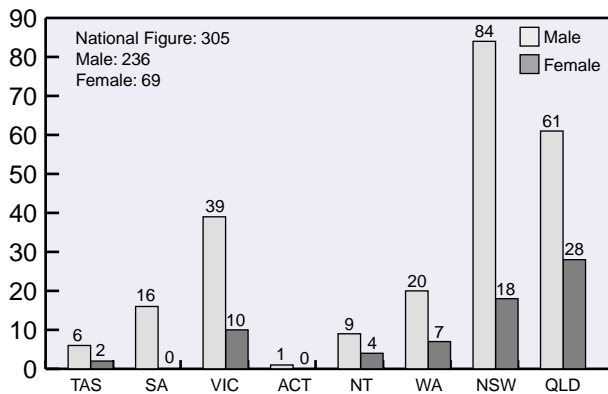


Chart 6

## THE NATIONAL FORECAST

This is the fifth annual National Drowning Report produced by The Royal Life Saving Society Australia, and despite increased education and public awareness campaigns, many Australians underestimate or remain unaware of the dangers associated with recreational water participation. Disturbingly, the national trends remain inappropriately high. (See Chart 6)

With a growing, ageing population, and long term trends towards warmer weather, strong ongoing drowning prevention education is needed to significantly reduce the national toll.

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia continues to educate Australians about how to modify their high risk behaviour and assume greater responsibility for themselves and others while in or around water. It is tragic, for example, that so many Australian children drown each year in backyard swimming pools and baths, and that older Australians are still none the wiser by either not wearing a life-jacket when aboard watercraft or by combining alcohol with aquatic participation. It is estimated that at least 50% of adult drowning can be attributed to alcohol consumption.



## WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA

PREVENTABLE WATER-RELATED DEATHS BY AGE GROUP

Water-Related Deaths by Age Group 1993-1998/99

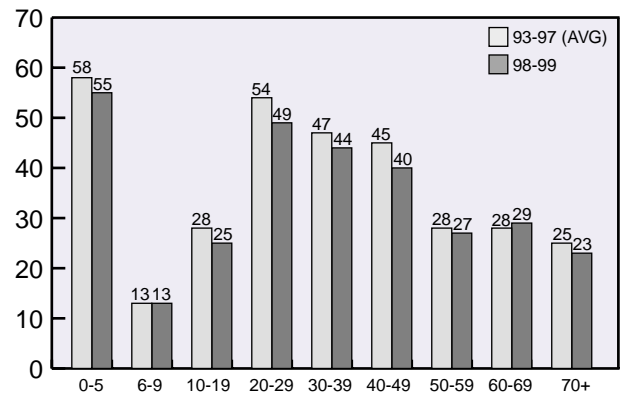


Chart 7

## WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

The 1998 - 1999 figures suggest some positive trends in the middle age brackets and some problems emerging in the lower age groups. (See Chart 7)

After several years of positive trends, the 6 - 9 year age group has returned a negative result in that 13 children drowned which is a significant increase on last year's result of 6. But may be attributed to two multiple drownings in the age group.

The 0 - 5 figures have reduced slightly, but remain unacceptable. The figures identified indicate that 1 child between the ages of 0 - 5 drowns every week in this country.

Positive results have been recorded in the middle age brackets with decreases against the five year average in the 20 - 29, 30 - 39 and 40 - 49 age brackets. This decreasing trend may be attributed to extensive school based water safety education throughout the past 15 years.

80% of all drownings identified are males. Young males in particular continue to participate in risk taking activities that can often end disastrously. Drowning represents the fifth most common "external cause" of death in Australia following suicide, motor vehicle accidents, accidental falls and homicide.

# THE KEEP WATCH 150 MISSION

In children under five years of age, drowning is the number one cause of preventable death. The Keep Watch Program has already helped reduce the number of infant and toddler drownings from 75 to 55 each year. Our mission, with your help, is to save 150 young lives over the next three years.

- Supervise your child
- Fence your pool
- Lock the pool gate
- Familiarise your child with water
- Learn resuscitation



## DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

WATER-RELATED DEATHS BY ACTIVITY 1993-1998/99

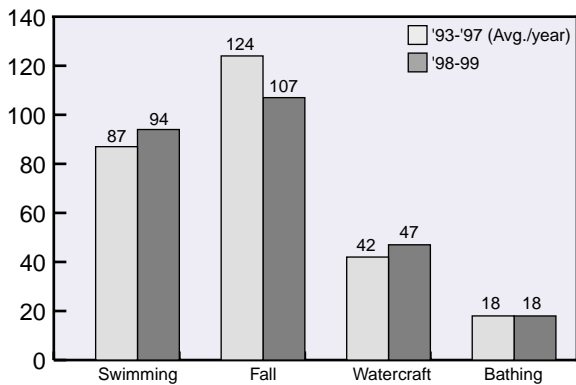


Chart 8

### ACTIVITY

During the tragic summer period, particularly January and February, the "swimming" related drownings were significantly up on the five year average. The formulation of the National Water Safety Plan by the Australian Water Safety Council has addressed numerous issues to ensure that identified problems are solved so that a repeat of the summer past does not become a continuing trend.

Drowning by "falls" had a significant increase of approximately 10% for 1998 - 1999, yet remained below the five year average. Falls are usually associated with children falling into swimming pools, rock fishermen being swept off rocks and individuals falling off boats etc. (See Chart 8)

A significant increase on the five year average has been identified in watercraft related drowning. The importance of wearing a life-jacket when on watercraft and not combining alcohol with aquatic participation should not be underestimated.

## TOURIST DROWNING

By Origin 1993-1997

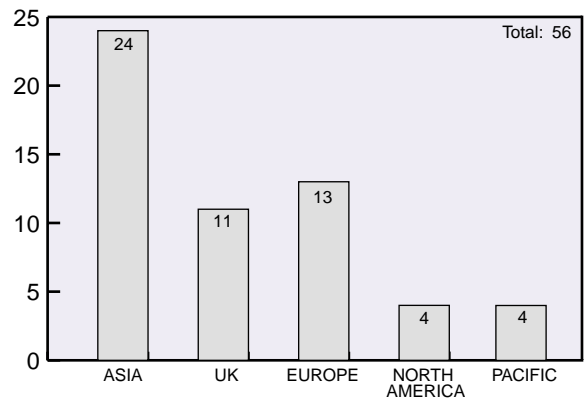


Chart 9

### TOURISTS - A CASE STUDY

The following graph provides an insight into tourism and drowning. Between 1993 and 1997 there were 56 reported drownings involving international tourists. This represents 4% of the total number of drownings recorded. In 1998 the Australian Water Safety Council stressed the need to provide water safety information to all inbound tourists, travel companies and tour guides. Surf beaches and inland waterways present the greatest hazards to individuals in this category. (See Chart 9)



ACT 02 6260 5800  
NSW 02 9879 4699

NT 08 8981 5036  
QLD 07 3823 2823

SA 08 8234 9244  
TAS 03 6234 1214

VIC 03 9568 5822  
WA 08 9383 9988

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) acknowledges the following organisations for their assistance:

*The Australian Bureau of Statistics, National and State Injury Surveillance Units, Coronial Information and other sources.*

The RLSSA is in the business of lifesaving and is a National volunteer-based organisation that continually strives to prevent aquatic related injury and death through its training programs, public education, research, consulting and international liaisons.

**For more information contact: RLSSA National Branch on 02 9181 5444 or RLSSA Website: [www.rlssa.org.au](http://www.rlssa.org.au)**



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helping save lives

