

Patterns of Drowning in Australia, 1992-1997.

Fenner PJ.

Med J Aust 2000; 172: 349

Ian Mackie is to be congratulated on his comprehensive synopsis on drowning in Australia.¹ Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) is aware of the patterns that Mackie states for surfing beaches and has been conducting research into ocean drowning and its prevention. Two target areas are male adolescents, particularly in the area of alcohol and swimming, and the high drowning rates in overseas visitors. Similar figures to those published by Mackie occurred in the summer season 1997/98, one of the worst years on record for ocean drowning in Australia. That year there were 64 fatalities with 62.5% victims drowned less than a kilometre from a lifesaving service;² it has been a previously identified frustrating fact that the further the drowning from the flagged area that there is less chance of survival.³ The largest single cause for drowning (39%) were rips, large bodies of water moving quickly out to sea to equilibrate the water levels, and stronger in rougher surf. Surf patrol flags only include safe areas of the beach between rips, which may be unfortunately small, encouraging people to swim in dangerous areas outside the flags.

Residential information was available for 64% victims, with 19% of these being international tourists, and 63.4% Australian residents living >50 kilometers inland. SLSA has recently conducted a major campaign to bring knowledge of surf safety to rural Australian schools. They have also been active, but unsuccessful, in trying to encourage incoming airlines to screen multilingual videos warning visitors of the danger of Australian surf, the majority of whom drown within 96 hours of arrival in Australia.⁴ Many tourists do not speak English and so multi-lingual handouts on surf safety are distributed at some airports, including Cooloongatta on the Gold Coast, Queensland. Further initiatives include the use of high-resolution surveillance video cameras situated at the top of beachfront high-rise buildings on the Gold Coast and the use of more surveillance vehicles and boats.

Substantial funding is essential to develop further initiatives to prevent ocean drownings in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, when thousands of tourists with little idea of the dangers of the surf reach Australia. Multilingual signs and information brochures must be used, safety auditing of beaches conducted, and factors predisposing the higher incidence of drowning investigated. Further education is essential but expensive. However, the Victorian Government recently invested \$3m in publicity on drowning awareness, reducing the state drowning fatality rate by 50% by the following 1998/99 season, during which time drownings in New South Wales increased by 200%. Money talks.

Yours faithfully

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¹ Mackie IJ. Patterns of drowning in Australia, 1992-1997. Med J Aust 1999; 171: 587-590.

² Leahy SJ, Fenner PJ, Harrison SL. Olympic visitors need to be told about the dangers of the Australian surf. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 1999; 4: 442.

³ Fenner PJ, Harrison SL, Williamson JA, Williamson BD. Success of surf lifesaving resuscitations in Queensland 1973-1992. Med J Aust 1995; 163:580-583.

⁴ Coastal incident database. Surf Life Saving Australia. Sydney 1997/98.