

Preventing coastal drownings: The need to educate visitors to the 2000 Olympic Games about the dangers of the Australian Surf.

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Surf Lifesaving Australia incident report forms indicate that more people drowned in the Australian surf during the 1997/8 season (October-April inclusive) than in any season in the past 20 years, despite the efforts of 22,000 active patrolling volunteer surf lifesavers and hired lifeguards. Eighty percent of the 64 victims were male and the average age was 35 years (range 4-75 years). All but one fatality occurred outside the area patrolled by surf lifesavers, with the unfortunate drowning between the flags occurring whilst the sole lifeguard was attending to a case in the first aid room. The majority of victims (62.5%) drowned within a kilometre of a lifesaving service, indicating that these people chose to bathe adjacent to rather than within the patrolled area. More fatalities (39%) were the direct result of swimming in a rip than any other cause. Of the 41 victims for whom place of residence was available, 19.5% were international tourists, 63.4% were Australian residents who lived more than 50 kilometres inland while 17.1% lived within 10 kilometres of where they drowned.

These findings reinforce the danger of swimming outside the red and yellow flags denoting the area patrolled by surf lifesavers. This conclusion is consistent with our previous research which showed that the likelihood of a being rescued and successfully resuscitated decreases with increasing distance from a patrolled area.¹ However, all too often, people choose to swim outside the flags. It is possible that crowded beaches, distance to the nearest patrolled beach, narrow patrol areas and/or a lack of understanding of the meaning of the flags, particularly by international visitors, influences their decision.² As rips were responsible for many of the reported fatalities, it may be time to make the public aware that when the flags are placed close together, this is usually because adjacent rips have left only short stretches of safe surf.

Our finding that many of the victims were those less likely to be familiar with the potential dangers of the surf (international tourists or inland residents) confirms the results of Short and co-workers.³ Therefore, the development of initiatives to prevent coastal drownings should be a priority in the lead-up to the 2000 Olympic Games, when thousands of tourists who may have little idea of the dangers of the surf will reach Australia's shores. Current research certainly suggests there will be large increases in visitors to many Australian beaches, particularly those around Sydney, with Bondi expecting 50,000 visitors per day throughout this period (Waverley City Council, pers. comm. 1999).

Public education should be directed at all potential beach visitors, from international tourists to locals. Promotion of surf safety must be extensive, ranging from multilingual brochures and educational videos, to multi-media campaigns. Passengers on incoming international aircraft are the perfect captive audience for such videos and brochures. Volunteer lifesavers who give up their weekends for the safety of the bathing public will need to be supplemented by paid lifeguards before, during and after the Olympic Games to ensure that as many beaches as possible are patrolled daily. An initiative under trial on the Gold Coast is the use of high-resolution surveillance video cameras situated at the top of beachfront high-rise buildings. Images from these cameras can be panned and zoomed by remote control, allowing larger areas of beach to be monitored with fewer guards. However, civil libertarians have criticised this initiative as an infringement of public rights. Other initiatives, which should be considered include multilingual signage, compulsory water safety education in schools, safety auditing of all beaches, and identification of surf and weather conditions that predispose to a higher incidence of drowning. Implementation of these preventive strategies to reduce drownings around the time of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney will require cooperation and a substantial financial contribution from all levels of Government.

References:

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