World Conference on Drowning Prevention – 2015

**Is the Australian Swimming Benchmark useful for the prevention of drownings?**

**Building an evidence base for conditions associated with fatal drownings**

Drowning fatalities are one of the 10 leading causes of death for people aged 1 to 24 years in every region of the world, according to the World Health Organisation’s inaugural World Drowning Report. While the fatal drowning toll is significantly lower in high income countries (HICs), it is still a significant issue that has not been remediated by the current approach to learn to swim (LTS) programs. In Australia, similar to other HICs, there is no empirical evidence either to support or refute the value for drowning prevention incorporated in any of the available LTS programs. While the amount of evidence-based research into the link between swimming and drowning prevention is growing, the picture is still unclear as to what aspects of swimming are associated with drowning prevention. Terms such as ‘basic swimming’, ‘survival swimming’, ‘water safety’ and ‘water competence’ are commonly used in regard to drowning prevention. However, in HICs such as Australia, these terms are interpreted and implemented in LTS programs in a widely variable manner, with the belief among some aquatic educators that ‘swimming’ equates to the skills required for the sport of swimming (i.e. competition) and that the skills within the sport equate to drowning prevention. There is also a large difference in the emphasis placed on ‘water safety’, with some believing it is largely secondary to swimming skills while others believe water safety is the most important skill. Finally, there is an axiomatic belief that skills learned in warm, still water (i.e. a pool) are transferable to open water conditions and vice versa.

The aim of this study is to examine whether the level of swimming and water safety identified in the Australian Water Safety Council’s Water Safety Strategy 2012-2015 is applicable to the aquatic conditions in which Australians are drowning (as reported in the Royal Lifesaving Society’s 2012-13 National Drowning Report). This study will investigate the following questions:

1. Is a young adult (18-34 years) who successfully completes the task requirements for the Royal Lifesaving Society’s Swim & Survive Active Award 4, in a heated stationary water environment, able to complete the same tasks in cold and/or non-stationary water conditions (both in swimwear and clothed) that mimic the common conditions for drowning in inland and open waters?
2. Are there any significant differences in time to task completion, confidence and/or movement strategies in completing the tasks between heated static water conditions and cold and/or non-stationary water conditions, either dressed in swimwear or clothed?
3. Is there any correlation between prior exposure to open water conditions (cold and/or moving water) and the ability to complete the simulated open water conditions?

Answering these questions will go towards building an evidence base that will help create a clearer picture of how swimming and drowning prevention are linked. This in turn will assist in decision making in both areas of aquatic research and education, which in turn will lead LTS programs towards using evidence-based practice in terms of drowning prevention.