

# THE NATIONAL DROWNING REPORT

## 296 PEOPLE DROWNED THIS YEAR!

### AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS EDGE DOWNWARDS

National trends suggest that 296 people drowned in preventable water related activities during the financial year 1999 - 2000. This figure is down by approximately 3 % from the previous year and slightly lower than the average of the previous five years.

Taking the Australian population growth into consideration, the preventable water related death rate is slightly below the 1994 - 98 year average, at 1.6 deaths per 100,000 population (See Chart #1).

With the approaching 2000 - 2001 summer, continued public awareness is essential to avoid the multiple drownings of last summer. The message from The Royal Life Saving Society Australia is that whenever you are in, on or near an aquatic environment, 'take care' and prevent further lives from being lost.

### LAKE, RIVER AND DAM DROWNINGS INCREASE BY 22%

1999 - 2000 again revealed a significant increase in lake, river and dam drownings. The flat, still appearance of lakes and rivers often gives a false impression. These locations remain the most dangerous when it comes to drowning. 133 deaths were recorded at these locations during the period, an increase of 7% on the figure of last year and an increase of 22% on the 1994 - 98 year average (See Chart #2).

The number of beach drownings is lower than the previous year's figures, which had been described as the worst in history. There were 41 beach drownings, a 5% decrease on the 1994 - 98 year average.

Backyard private swimming pools and bathtubs also showed high proportions of drowning with 46 and 17 recorded respectively, although 1999 - 00 revealed a downward trend in bathtub drownings when compared to the 5-year average.

These two locations remain the biggest threat to children aged between 0 - 5 years. Parents are being asked to Keep Watch.

### AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS

Water Related Deaths and Death Rates 1994 - 1999/00

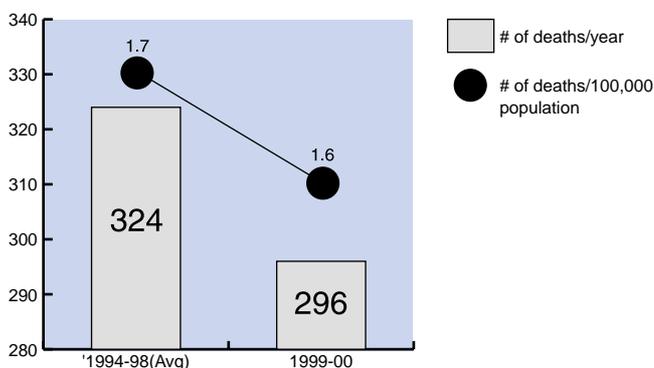


Chart 1

### INLAND WATERWAYS DOMINATE DROWNINGS

Water Related Deaths by Location

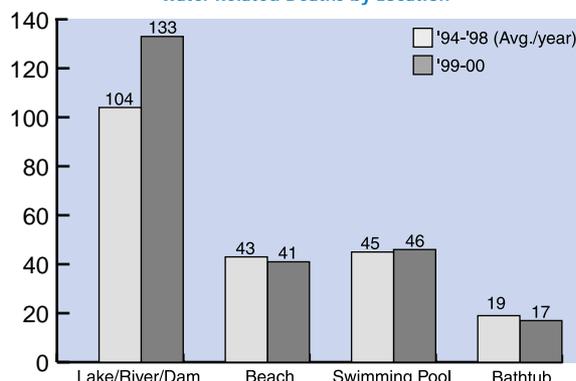


Chart 2

# THE 0 - 5 AGE GROUP OUR NATIONAL DISGRACE

## OUR BABIES CONTINUE TO DROWN

Early indications for 1999 - 00 suggest that 63 Australian children under 5 years of age died as a result of drowning (See Chart #3). For every drowning death there was approximately three children admitted to hospital as a result of an immersion incident.

In Australia, this equates to about 189 "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.

### TODDLER DROWNINGS BY LOCATION 1999/00

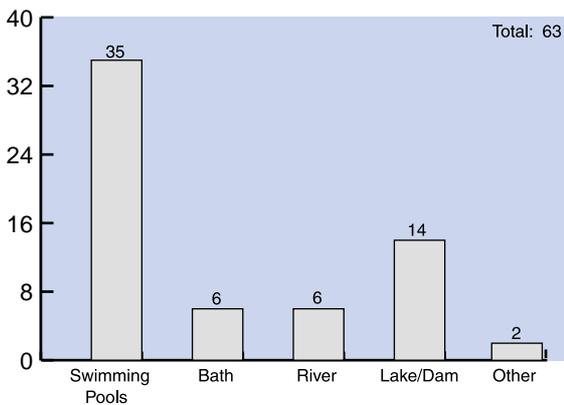


Chart 3

### TODDLER DROWNINGS A NATIONAL DISGRACE

#### 0-5 Age Group Water-Related Deaths 1994-1999/00

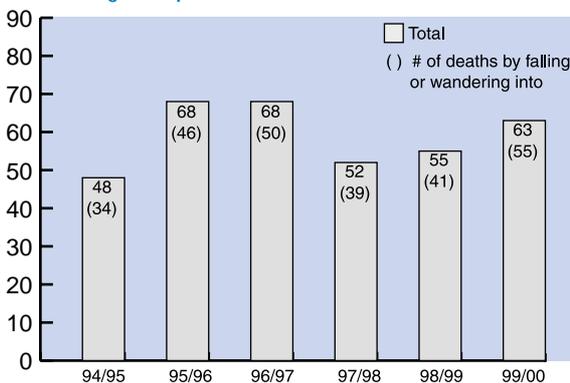


Chart 4

## 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 1994, swimming pools account for 48% of drowning in this age group. 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 32% of drowning occurs in dams, lakes and rivers with 20 such cases recorded in the past year, a 25% increase on the figure for last year. The importance of supervision and the creation of child safe areas should not be underestimated (See Chart #3).

## 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. 75 % of 0 - 5 drownings result from a child wandering off and falling into the water resulting in a submersion incident. This reinforces the message of "KEEP WATCH" whenever children are in, on or around water environments. (See Chart #4).





## THE NATIONAL FORECAST

This is the sixth 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 #5).

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 30 % of adult drowning can be attributed to alcohol consumption.

The past year has shown an alarming increase in the number of multiple drowning fatalities. The importance of widespread water safety education courses should not be overlooked. Contact the RLSSA for more information today.

## WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

(See Chart #6) The 1999 - 00 figures suggest some positive trends in the middle age brackets and some problems emerging in the lower age groups.

Positive trends are emerging in the 6 - 9 and 10 - 19 year age groups, both achieving a significant reduction against the 1994 - 1998 year average. Last year only five children between the ages of 6 and 9 were lost to drowning. This can be attributed to increased levels of participation in swimming and water safety programs such as Swim and Survive.

The 0 - 5 figures have increased significantly and remain unacceptable. The figures identified indicate that one child between the ages of 0 - 5 drown every week in this country.

Positive results have been recorded in the 20 - 29 age bracket with a decrease of 22% to 41 drownings against the five-year average. Continued public education campaigns targeting this group appear to be having an effect as this figure represents a decrease for the third consecutive year.

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 fourth most common "accidental" cause of death in Australia following motor vehicle / traffic accidents, accidental falls and poisoning.

## THE NATIONAL FORECAST

National Figures with State Breakdown

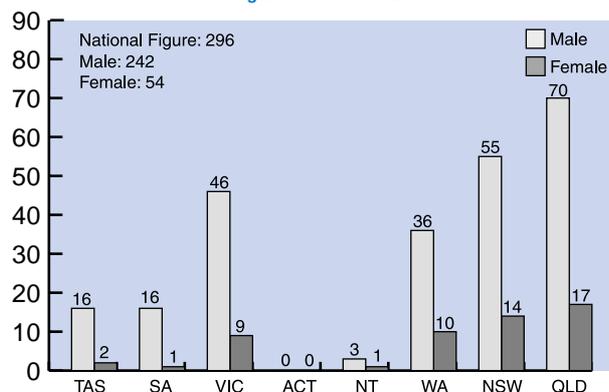


Chart 5

## WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Preventable Water Related Deaths by Age Group 1994-1999/00

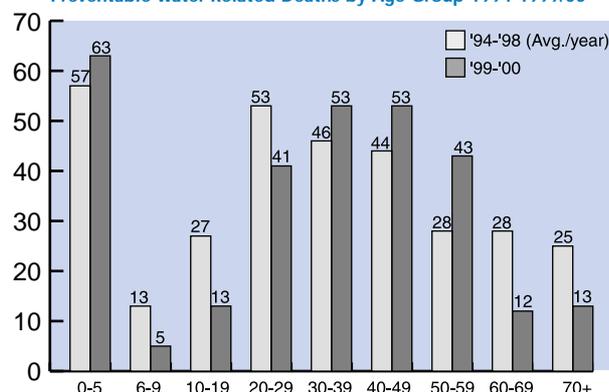


Chart 6



## NATIONAL WATER SAFETY RESEARCH PROJECT

In late November the Australian Water Safety Council will release a comprehensive analysis of drowning in Australia. Coordinated by Dr Ann Williamson, Director of the NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre, the report will shed further light on the causes and circumstances of deaths by drowning.

### DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

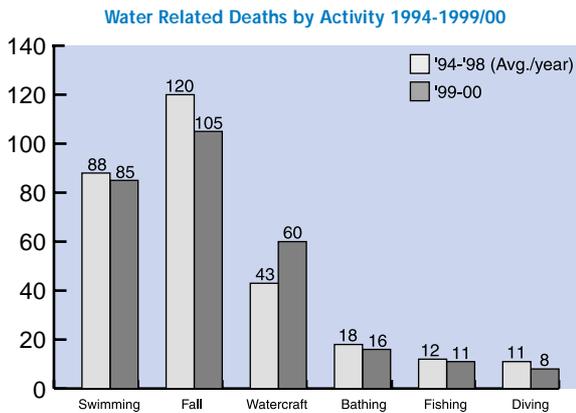


Chart 7

### KEEP WATCH



Sadly every week in Australia a child under 5 years of age drowns.

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia and Pfizer are working together to change these figures.

To do this The Royal Life Saving Society has produced the Parent Water Safety Cassette to educate parents and carers of young children.

## ACTIVITY

With a number of tragic boating accidents occurring in last years summer period, the "watercraft" related drownings were significantly up on the five-year average, increasing by 30%. Recreational boaters need to ensure that their craft is seaworthy, that weather conditions are safe and that they have sufficient PFD's for all those on board

Drowning by "falls" and "swimming" had a slight decrease for 1999 - 2000. Falls are usually associated with children falling into swimming pools, lakes, rivers and dams. (See Chart #7).

"Fishing" and "Diving" related drownings remain consistent with the five-year average. Fishing accidents often involve individuals not taking the appropriate precautions when fishing from rock ledges.



**The Royal Life Saving Society Australia**

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 VIC 03 9568 5822  
 WA 08 9383 9988

## WATER SAFETY EDUCATION ONLINE

The RLSSA is urging parents to take a greater role in the water safety education of their children. The soon to be launched website [www.wetnwise.com](http://www.wetnwise.com) and the very popular [www.swimandsurvive.com](http://www.swimandsurvive.com), are two ways that parents can get involved. Why not visit these sites with your children and learn a little about water safety together.

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)**

