

Australian Medical Association Limited

ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604

Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499

Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



WATER SAFETY – NOT JUST FOR THE BEACH

Australia’s rivers and creeks can be more dangerous than its beaches, and people need to be vigilant around all waterways this summer, AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, said today.

“Aquatic activities are an essential part of the Australian summer, providing much-needed reprieve from the heat, and forming a pivotal part of many family and social gatherings,” Dr Gannon said.

“However, in 2016-17, 291 people drowned in Australian rivers, creeks, beaches, lakes, pools, and even bathtubs.

“Almost 700 more were treated in hospital for injuries sustained in the water, and many of them have been left with permanent injuries, including spinal injuries and brain damage.

“All of these incidents are tragic and, for many families, the consequences are life-long.

“Rivers and creeks claimed the most lives – 68 – showing the need to take care around all waterways, particularly at times of heavy rain or flooding.

“There are many ways to be safe in and around the water.

“Never swim alone, and never while intoxicated.

“Check the depth before entering the water, and it is always safest to enter feet first.

“Depth can change from day to day depending on currents and tides, so never assume that you know the depth. Remember that one in 10 of all new spinal injuries occurs in the water.

“Never leave children unsupervised, and remember that flotation devices can make children appear more competent in the water than they actually are.

“If your child is given pool toys for Christmas, make sure that you familiarise yourself with the safety instructions, and ensure that all toys are appropriate for the age and weight of the child.

“Leaving toys in the pool can tempt children into the water. Deflate and pack away toys when they are not in use to remove this temptation.

“At the beach, always swim between the flags, and check warning signs for dangerous conditions such as rips.

“Always wear a lifejacket while rock fishing, boating, or taking part in activities like kayaking, windsurfing, or jetskiing.

“Know your limits – if you have a pre-existing medical condition, see your GP for a check-up and make sure you are fit to swim.

“Last year, 47 of the people who drowned had a pre-existing condition, and 36 of the drowning deaths were people aged 75 or older.”

Background

- In 2016-17, 291 people drowned in Australia – a three per cent increase on the 282 drowning deaths in 2015-16.
- Of these deaths, 113 were during the summer period.
- An additional 685 people were hospitalised following non-fatal drownings, many of whom will require long-term medical assistance.
- Rivers and creeks were the most dangerous waterways (68 deaths), followed by beaches (50), ocean/harbour locations (46), and swimming pools (44).
- There was a 32 per cent increase in drowning deaths of children under the age of five, with 29 lives lost.
- The 25-34 year age group accounted for the highest number of drowning deaths (43), followed by people aged 45-54 years (40), and those aged 75 and over (36).
- Drowning in school aged children (5-14) was the lowest of any age group (12).
- International tourists accounted for 20 of the deaths, predominantly from European (45 per cent) and Asian (40 per cent) countries, as well as six international students
- About 10 per cent of all new spinal injuries occur during aquatic activities.

(Source: Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2017)

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CONTACT: John Flannery 02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
 Maria Hawthorne 02 6270 5478 / 0427 209 753

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