

Why were you swimming there? Analysis of risky swimming behaviour on Australian beaches

Professor Ann Williamson¹, Dr Julie Hatfield², Dr Shauna Sherker³, Dr Rob Brander⁴ and Dr Andrew Hayen⁵

Department of Aviation, University of New South Wales¹, NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre, University of New South Wales², Surf Life Saving Australia³, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales⁴, School of Public Health, University of Sydney⁵

The choices people make about where they will swim will determine, to a large extent their risk of drowning, injury, or rescue: it is safest to swim in areas that are patrolled by lifeguards or lifesavers, and swimming outside these areas is risky.

Our previous research demonstrated that while most beachgoers interviewed in New South Wales, Australia are aware that swimming in patrolled areas of the beach is safest, a significant proportion report swimming outside patrolled areas. This study examined the reasons for beachgoers choosing to swim in safe or risky areas on beaches in Sydney, Australia.

Beachgoers observed swimming in a patrolled area, an unpatrolled area with no rip current, or an unpatrolled area near a rip current were approached and invited to answer questions about their choice to swim in that area of the beach. Over 1,000 people were interviewed over two weekends in the summer of 2009. The results of the interviews showed that swimming choice was directed primarily by convenience; beachgoers chose the closest area to swim, even though they were aware that the patrolled area was safer. Swimmers observed swimming in risky locations showed the least knowledge of rip currents. Swimmers in risky locations were also more likely to be younger, to not live near the beach, to not swim regularly and to be less aware of other beach hazards. Multivariate analysis showed that swimmers who choose to swim in an unpatrolled rather than patrolled area were twice as likely to have not assessed the swimming conditions before swimming. They were less likely to have checked for rips, were more likely to be male and to be younger. The study indicates that a specific intervention would be worthwhile for beachgoers who swim outside patrolled areas and further, the study defines who should be targeted to be most effective.

Corresponding Author

Dr Julie Hatfield
Senior Research Fellow
NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre
Building G2
University of NSW
Sydney NSW Australia 2052
Email: j.hatfield@unsw.edu.au
Telephone: +61 2 9385 7949