
Open water safety messages: Spreading the word

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Globally, many organizations have promoted a variety of messages and skills to prevent drowning in recreational open water settings. This diversity reflects the multifaceted nature of the drowning problem, the number of different groups involved in prevention and the lack of an evidence basis. Our objective was to develop and disseminate a consensus-based set of simple, generic drowning prevention messages for the general public for non-boating related recreation in various open water settings such as lakes, rivers or the ocean(1). The focus of this presentation is to look at how these messages can be disseminated through the assets and resources of a volunteer international open water drowning prevention task force.

Development of key messages related to drowning is common practice at a local, state, federal or global level. This often involves partnerships between organizations or individuals with common interests. What is more variable is what is done to develop and measure specific strategies and tactics related to dissemination (2,3).

Our objectives were twofold:

1. Raise awareness internationally among aquatic, water safety, drowning prevention and injury prevention professionals about the development and availability of non boating related open water drowning prevention guidelines
2. Raise awareness among the general public about key actions to keep self and others, such as children, safe around open water

We focused outreach in three ways that would provide the greatest impact with limited resources: publication and presentation of the guidelines and methodology in professional journals and conferences; dissemination through task force members and their organizations; internet available information. Evaluation methods included: tracking task force members' self reports of activities; web site hits and web searches to identify use of messages.

The tools, strategies, and tactics from this effort will be shared. They can be replicated at a small or large scale. During the course of this work we learned that dissemination through multiple channels and organizations involved both centralized and decentralized approaches to sharing information. We had to decide on what we could control – for example, the message wording in English vs. what we couldn't control – exact translations or educational vehicles unique to a country.

Challenges included the volunteer nature of task force member involvement which made it difficult to know what to expect in terms of dissemination. Presentations at conferences were both planned and opportunistic which led to some last minute preparation and missed opportunities.

For effective dissemination on a global scale, a plan must be made at the national and international level from the beginning, addressing costs, roles and responsibilities. Because dissemination involves different disciplines and specialized resources, consultation with media and public relations resources is needed. Effective communication strategies and tactics are as critical a part of the process as the messages themselves.

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References

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