

## The rescuer who drowns

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### Background/Introduction

There is no greater sacrifice than that made by a rescuer who throws it all on the line to rescue a drowning victim. Professions such as 'lifesaver' or 'lifeguards', either salaried or volunteer, are highly skilled at rescuing a drowning victim. However, many rescues are attempted by those with little or no training and subsequently the 'rescuer' tragically drowns in the rescue attempt. The challenge is to prevent the aquatic 'rescuer' from drowning. This paper examines the circumstances surrounding the drowning deaths of 'rescuers' in an Australian total population study.

### Methods

We have identified all drowning deaths using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Deaths Registrar for the period 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2002 and the National Coroners Information System (NCIS) in conjunction with the National Drowning Report for the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2009. Perusal of the details surround every such fatality has allowed us to identify an unselected complete subset of drowning incidents where a 'rescuer' drowned in attempting to effect a save.

### Results

Over the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2009 we have identified 98 victims who drowned whilst attempting a rescue. Of these over two-thirds (69%) were male. The majority (61%) were aged between 25 and 49 years. Where data concerning the location of the aquatic incident was available (n=37) the site pattern was: beaches (35%); rivers (21%); ocean (16%). Other sites where the 'rescuer' drowned included harbor, bay, public swimming pool and dam. Perhaps as a reflection of aquatic participation, summer (42%) was the season of most 'rescuer' fatalities.

### Discussion

The urge to leap into action to help someone in trouble, particularly a loved one, is an altruistic impulse. Such attempted rescues are appropriately a source of pride in Australia. Such courage and altruism is celebrated through the bestowal of medals and other community accolades. Sadly a percentage (unknown) who attempt such a rescue do not return home. The drills and skills taught by lifesaving and water safety agencies provide an excellent skill set which enables a potential rescuer to ensure both that they place themselves only at minimum risk commensurate the circumstance; and that they have the experience to undertake an effective rescue.

### Conclusion

'Rescuers' who drown comprise a well recognised but inadequately studied subset of those who drown. We postulate that the sole effective preventative stratagem to reduce the incidence of such tragic incidents is to empower all with the basic drills and skills of non-contact rescues when faced with the imperative to attempt to save a drowning child, family member, colleague or encountered victim.

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