
Open water safety messages: Spreading the word in New Zealand

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An International Task Force, comprising of 18 drowning prevention experts and practitioners from around the world, was formed after the 2007 World Water Safety Conference in Oporto in order to establish simple, consistent, generic drowning prevention guidelines targeted at parents, caregivers, and individuals around open water. After two years of deliberation, the Task Force finally agreed upon 16 key guidelines that addressed open water drowning prevention. These were subdivided into two sections – keeping yourself safe and keeping others safe. Whilst it proved a difficult enough task for experts to agree on clear, concise messages that are relevant in all open water settings around the world, the success of the task can only be determined by the uptake of the messages.

The first phase in the dissemination of the messages worldwide was to create a set of generic on-line resources to facilitate communication to water safety organisation and the drowning prevention community at large. The co-chairs of the Task Force developed a toolkit comprising of introductory letters, power point presentations, media releases and posters for the promotion of the messaging.

In the case of New Zealand, the dissemination of the messages is being delivered via the following methods:

- Website – promotion of messages and rationale on www.watersafe.org.nz
- Media release – distribution of media release to national media
- Newsletter – promotion in Waiora newsletter. Distribution to 1000 aquatic organisations, health promotion, and injury prevention organisations, local government councils, politicians and community groups
- Presentations
 - at a regional forum to 65 individuals from various aquatic organisations (such as Surf Life Saving Northern), 5–10 swim schools (such as Aquanauts Swim School and SwimMagic), community groups (such as Safekids New Zealand), health promotion groups (such as Auckland District Health Board), injury prevention organisations (such as Auckland Pasifika Injury Prevention Network), lifejacket manufacturers, politicians and council pool compliance staff
 - at national education forums comprising of 35 national aquatic organisations (such as Surf Life Saving New Zealand, Swimming New Zealand, Coastguard New Zealand) who are members of the national organisation, Water Safety New Zealand
- Development of specific formal education material for school children freely available on the internet and promoted to teachers through professional development

An exciting development has been the use of the open water safety messages to provide the basis for the development of the 'New Zealand Open Water Safety Code', a guide that sits alongside the Mountain Safety Code and the Recreational Boating Safety Code. It is anticipated that this Code will form the basis of a national safe summer promotion at the beginning of the New Zealand Summer in October 2010.

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