Drowning in the Great Lakes of Uganda: A neglected problem

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Introduction
Drowning was demonstrated in a 1997 community study to be the lead cause of injury deaths in the greater Mukono area of central Uganda contributing 27% of injury deaths. Hospital Studies in this area did not confirm the findings of this community study. This area borders on the largest lake in Africa, Lake Victoria and Lake Kyoga which is a large reservoir of the River Nile. Activities implicated as causes of drowning include ferry/boat transportation and commercial fishing. Since the above study was conducted there has been neither follow up research nor intervention programs introduced to address the burden of drowning. Moreover interfaces of humans and water bodies have continued. There are neither community studies nor mandatory death registrations to drowning related data.

Objective
To compare drowning and near drowning cases reported in the hospital trauma registries and the media in the year 2010.

Methods
We searched five Uganda-based English print media published reports of drowning in 2010 newspaper magazines and compared these with drowning and near drowning cases recorded in a nationwide regional hospital based trauma registry.

Results
From January–July 2010, a total of 98 persons were reported in the five newspapers. All newspapers carried some information on drowning events involving at least 20 people. Of the 98 cases, a total of 61(62.2%) drowning deaths were confirmed while a total of 21(21.4%) were near drowning cases. There was inconclusive information regarding the survival and or rescue of the remaining 16 (16.3%) persons. All the media reported cases were transportation related drowning. From a total of 2834 trauma registry cases in the same period of 2010, only 3 (0.1%) cases were recorded. All these were near drowning cases.

Conclusions
Drowning is common and among the leading causes of injury deaths in the central region of Uganda. This problem is likely not limited to central Uganda as there are large lakes on the Ugandan border and Lake Victoria is also part of the geography of Eastern Uganda. There is no systematic process to record and track drowning related incidents and deaths in Uganda. Hospital-based trauma registries greatly underestimate the burden of drowning. The lack of information could be attributed to a lack of synthesized research and information regarding the burden of drowning.

Recommendations
Systematic community-based surveys are needed to quantify the burden of drowning and act as a baseline research for drowning interventional research in Uganda.

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