Water safety education is more than teaching swimming skills: Comprehensive drowning prevention education

Per Ludvik Kjendlie$^{1,3}$, Robert Keig Stallman$^{2,3}$ and Bjorn Harald Olstad$^{2,3}$
Vestfold University College$^1$, Norwegian Life Saving Society$^2$, Norwegian School of Sport Science$^3$

Introduction
The phrase ‘Water Safety’ is used in various ways. Some focus primarily on cautious behaviour on, in or around the water. Others focus on rescue or self rescue. Many who teach swimming skills, assume that this is water safety and is somehow protective. We have argued elsewhere for a more comprehensive, i.e. all-around aquatic skill development; ‘watermanship’ or aquatic competence. However comprehensive water safety also goes even further. Even excellent all-around skills may not suffice if pertinent knowledge of local conditions is not present. Skill and knowledge may not suffice if one has insufficient respect for the powers of nature and the chance of random risk. And finally, one can still make a fatal judgement.

Methods
A literature search identified many definitions of ‘water safety’. By combining the elements most frequently cited and identifying the contents of the more comprehensive definitions, a synthesis was arrived at which forms a conceptual definition of water safety.

Results
The ‘conceptual’ model of a definition of water safety includes four elements, a) all-around aquatic skill, b) knowledge of general and local conditions, c) an attitude of healthy respect for the elements and for human frailty and human error, d) the ability to make correct judgements in risk situations.

Discussion
Many varieties of aquatic education are practiced in the name of water safety. Not all are equally oriented to drowning prevention. Not all address elements other than skill. As we have seen, skill is often not enough. This is one explanation for why some known as good swimmers, still drown. Perhaps the other most frequent missing link is local knowledge. The complex of elements described here are often neglected and may be the key to high drowning statistics. When these elements are combined they form a rather solid defence. When one or more of the elements is missing, the results can be fatal. Some may find teaching swimming skills very enjoyable but that teaching the other elements is less enjoyable and more difficult. This needs to be addressed. The knowledge that other elements than skill are a critical part of the causative picture, needs to be imparted to all aquatic educators. And techniques for presenting the other elements, even to children, must be developed and disseminated. One aspect which really touches knowledge, attitude and judgement, is one’s ability to correctly perceive their own competence. The combination of overestimating one’s ability and underestimating the risk has been called the ‘deadly duo’.

Conclusions
Water safety education is a comprehensive challenge and requires reflection, innovative teaching and team work.

References

Corresponding Author
Robert Keig Stallman
Assoc. Professor
Norw. LS Soc/Nor Sch SS
Sandvollvn. 80
Ski Akershus Norway 1400
Email: robertkeig_stallman@yahoo.com
Telephone: +47 90767299