Lack of caregiver supervision: a contributing factor in Australian unintentional child drowning deaths, 2000–2009

Dymphna Eszenyi

To the Editor: In their recent article on unintentional child drowning deaths, Petrass, Blivitch and Finch refer to the "limited detail within both police reports and findings" for South Australian cases of drowning.[1]

Since 2005, South Australia's Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee (CDSIRC), which I chair, has considered the circumstances and causes of all child deaths in SA. The legislation governing the CDSIRC's work quite rightly precludes the publication of individual details of children's deaths, but, since 2005, the CDSIRC's annual report has given a summary of the

circumstances and causes of drowning deaths for children in each year.

Children drown in a variety of circumstances — in fish ponds, rivers, lakes, dams, buckets of water and in boating accidents — but the greatest number, especially among those under 4 years of age, drown in backyard swimming pools.[2] In these incidents, time and again I read about failures of supervision, gate closure and adherence to pool fencing regulations and the maintenance of this fencing. Although the extent and nature of supervision may be of academic interest, the prevention of childhood drowning would best be served by the ongoing promulgation of well researched public health campaigns, such as those delivered by the Royal Life Saving Society — Australia and Kidsafe Australia, and attention to legislative changes that will ensure the regular inspection and maintenance of swimming pool fencing.

The CDSIRC's review of child drownings in SA is based on the detailed information obtained by SA police from witnesses present at the time of the event. This almost always provides a great depth of detail that enables the identification of the key risk factors present in the circumstances of the death. It is unfortunate if this information was not available to Petrass and colleagues, but it is incorrect to infer that such information is not collected in SA.

The CDSIRC's annual reports are available from its website.[3] Similar reports are produced by child death review committees or teams in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

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1 Petrass LA, Blitvich JD, Finch CF. Lack of caregiver supervision: a contributing factor in Australian unintentional child drowning deaths, 2000–2009. *Med J Aust* 2011; 194: 228-231.
2 Royal Life Saving Society — Australia. The National Drowning Report 2010. Special issue: child drowning deaths. Sydney: Royal Life Saving Society — Australia, 2010. http://www.royallifesaving.com.au//resources/documents/2010_Drowning_Report.pdf (accessed Jul 2011).
3 Government of South Australia. Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee. Publications. Annual reports. http://www.cdsirc.sa.gov.au/cdsirc/Publications/tabid/476/Default.aspx (accessed Jul 2011). ❑

Lauren A Petrass, Jennifer D Blitvich and Caroline F Finch

In reply: Information made available by South Australia's Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee is similar to that in other Australian states that have a Child Death Review Committee; all produce an annual report of circumstances related to child deaths, including child drowning. While we are aware of these reports, for our study of child drowning, individual case details were required that cannot be extracted from compiled summaries in annual reports.

By contrast, the National Coroners Information System (NCIS) provides access to original documents for individual drowning cases. Details for South Australian child drownings in the NCIS database were very limited, although at no point in our article did we infer that this information is not collected in SA; rather we stated that that coroners findings were only available for 38.1% of cases in the NCIS, and that autopsy and toxicology reports are not routinely uploaded.[1]

Further, the recently revised position paper of the National Drowning Prevention Alliance (NDPA) states that neither a single device nor a single solution can prevent child drownings, and recommended that caregivers, aquatic facility owners, managers and operators use "layers of protection" to aid in child drowning prevention.[2] We certainly agree that the ongoing promulgation of well researched public health campaigns is an important layer in the prevention of child drowning, although, to date, no published studies have investigated the effectiveness or rigorously evaluated Australian aquatic death prevention campaigns (such as Keep Watch, Kids Alive — Do The Five, SafeWaters and Play it Safe by the Water). However, the NDPA did identify that supervision is the one layer that should be ever-present, regardless of what other layers are used.[2]

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1 Petrass LA, Blitvich JD, Finch CF. Lack of caregiver supervision: a contributing factor in Australian unintentional child drowning deaths, 2000–2009. *Med J Aust* 2011; 194: 228-231.
2 National Drowning Prevention Alliance Education Committee. Layers of protection around aquatic environments to prevent child drowning. NPDA, 2009 (revised 2011). http://www.ndpa.org/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8&Itemid=18 (accessed Jul 2011). ❑