



Shining a light on the rise of non-fatal drowning, the hidden heartache and cost to families

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For every fatal drowning of a child under the age of four, eight to nine children on average are hospitalised each year from non-fatal drowning injuries that sometimes result in severe brain injuries and learning disabilities, finds research from the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia quantifying the real size and cost of the problem.

Of the non-fatal drowning incidents that occurred in home swimming pools, 75 per cent involved children under five years of age and nearly 10 per cent involved children between the ages of five to nine.

Children under four represented 42 per cent of those hospitalised, it says. "The drowning problem is much bigger than you realise," Michael Morris, managing director of the Samuel Morris Foundation, said. "As advocates trying to push awareness of non-fatal drowning, we've been saying this to decision makers."

Now, for the first time, there is comprehensive data to complement anecdotal accounts.

A total of 6158 people of all ages were hospitalised for a non-fatal drowning from July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2015, according to the national RLSSA study.

The annual number of non-fatal drownings over this period increased 42 per cent, from 394 in 2002-03 to 561 in 2014-15.

There were 2253 fatal drownings in the same period, decreasing from 192 in 2002-03 to 159 in 2014-15 (a drop of 17 per cent).

Of those hospitalised after a non-fatal incident, 5 per cent of cases were so serious that they accounted for about 88 per cent of the

\$6.91 million cost of treatment.

A week ago the RLSSA held a symposium of experts to review the latest research and develop strategies to reduce these injuries.

RLSSA's national research manager Amy Peden said the large number of non-fatal injuries could be a result of more awareness by families of the need to seek help after someone submerged in water experiences any kind of respiratory problems. It could also be because of an increase in the practice of CPR, which is saving many lives.

Mr Morris said many victims such as his son Samuel who died in 2014, eight years after a non-fatal drowning in the family pool caused him serious brain injury, were often "invisible".

The media often focused on those who died and "miraculous survivals", he said, while many who survived and suffered from ongoing problems were overlooked.

The report argued for a new way to describe drownings, to more accurately convey the size of the problem and better target safety campaigns. Justin Scarr, the chief executive officer of RLSSA, said many children who survived a drowning lived with significant lifelong medical issues that placed great emotional and financial strain on their families.



Jo-ann and Michael Morris with son Samuel, who died in 2014.

SIZING UP THE PROBLEM

July 1, 2002 - June 30, 2015

Total number of drowning fatalities	2253	Annual non-fatal drownings
Non-fatal drownings resulting in hospitalisation	6158	
Cases of non-fatal drownings on average each year	475	
		2002-03 394
		2014-15 561
		▲42%

Source: Royal Life Saving Society