

New report shows extent of drowning deaths in developing countries

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In global public health circles, drowning has been little more than a ripple with little interest and even less data.

So the release of the World Health Organization's (WHO) first [Global Report on Drowning](#) on 18 November in Geneva is big news.

Before this week, drowning was an orphan issue in development, with the spotlight firmly on communicable diseases including malaria.

Yet drowning claims 372,000 lives every year; 91% of those deaths are in low and middle income countries.

The report makes the point that drowning has a similar burden now to that of diarrhoea and measles in 70s and 80s, before concerted global efforts managed to significantly reduce the number of deaths.

One of the major problems for drowning prevention advocates has been the lack of data. In developing countries, in the absence of functioning births, deaths and marriages facilities, data collection is heavily reliant on health facilities. Yet the speed with which drowning kills means victims are unlikely to present to any health facility; most are simply buried.

That has meant very labour intensive efforts were needed to gather data; more than two million households have been included in face-to-face interviews in the developing nations of Asia.

It's important to note the leading role Australia has played in bringing this issue to light.

For more than a decade the [Royal Life Saving Society – Australia](#) has been quietly working behind the scenes to support research, advocacy and implement programs in developing countries. Its decision to host the 2011 [World Conference on Drowning Prevention](#) in Danang, Vietnam, garnered a lot of attention globally and showcased some of the research being generated in developing countries. Royal Life Saving has driven drowning as a health issue with the Australian Government which, through AusAID, committed funding to establish the [International Drowning Research Centre – Bangladesh](#).

So will this just be another report to be filed or will there be a real impact? The signals from the WHO are positive: WHO Director-General Margaret Chan and Bloomberg Philanthropies Founder Michael Bloomberg [spoke at the launch](#), which bodes well for future commitments to drowning prevention.

Disclosure: the author was a volunteer with The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC), one of the key contributors to this report, in Thailand and Bangladesh from 2007-2008 and was National Communications Manager for Royal Life Saving Society - Australia from 2008-2009.