

ALCOHOL AND RISK TAKING DROWNING PREVENTION WORKSHOP STATEMENT

October 16th and 17th 2024 ~ Melbourne



Workshop Organisers



Section 1. Background

The [Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030](#) (AWSS) identifies key drowning prevention priorities areas of focus, establishing a roadmap for action that aims to reduce drowning across Australia. As part of an engagement approach focused on a midpoint review of the AWSS 2030, Royal Life Saving – Australia, in collaboration with Surf Life Saving Australia, Life Saving Victoria, and La Trobe University's Centre for Alcohol Policy Research and Sport and Social Impact, convened a drowning prevention workshop on two focus areas of the AWSS 2030: Alcohol and other drugs and Risk taking.

The workshop's think tank environment brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to discuss current challenges, review relevant sections of the Australian Water Safety Strategy, and examine successful initiatives from related health sectors.(2) The workshop's main objectives were to foster collaborative thinking and to develop a collective agenda for tackling alcohol and risk-taking behaviours in aquatic environments, paving the way for more targeted and effective water safety interventions across Australia.

Alcohol and other drugs continue to play a significant role in drowning and aquatic injuries across Australia. [Data from the last five years indicate](#) that at least 43% of drowning cases recorded the presence of

alcohol or other drugs,(1) and Australian research has shown one in five drowning deaths among people aged 15 and over recorded blood alcohol concentrations at or above 0.05%.(3) Alcohol consumption increases risk by impairing cognitive function, judgment, and reaction time. Population data in Australia demonstrates that swimming under the influence of alcohol is the second most common risky activity people engage in, surpassed only by driving.(4) Besides alcohol, other drugs, which includes both prescription medication (e.g., benzodiazepines prescription) and illicit drugs (e.g., cannabis and amphetamines), also contribute to drowning risk.(1)

Risk-taking in aquatic environments is a complex drowning prevention topic. People tend to underestimate the dangers of frequent, familiar activities like swimming in currents, while overestimating the risks of rare but high-profile events, such as shark attacks. Impaired risk perception, often exacerbated by alcohol, peer pressure, or limited understanding, is especially concerning for water safety. Theories on risk perception, including research on the motivations behind risk-related behaviours in aquatic settings, were central to discussions at the workshop, as these insights can inform safety strategies and behaviour change initiatives.

Acknowledgements: This workshop statement was co-drafted and reviewed by the workshop attendees, see Page 8. Special thanks to Associate Professor Justine Leavy, Associate Professor Gemma Crawford, Lauren Nimmo and Dr Tina Lam for their additional contributions to this work.

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Section 2. Workshop Summary

Session 1

The workshop started with a powerful presentation by Dr Elspeth Muir who shared the story of her brother, Alexander, who was alcohol intoxicated when he drowned in the Brisbane River at the age of 21 after a night out with friends. Elspeth published a book based on this experience and a critical evaluation of Australia's relationship with alcohol, titled [*Wasted: A story of alcohol, grief and a death in Brisbane*](#). Elspeth shared insights on the historical, social, financial, and cultural role alcohol plays in Australian society, and reminded the group that individuals and families are behind each number.

The second presentation of the workshop was from Professor Emmanuel Kuntsche, Director of the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at La Trobe University. Emmanuel provided a background and overview of alcohol as an issue of public health, specifically examining the role of the alcohol industry. Emmanuel discussed tactics the industry uses in advertising to influence policy and public perception, and the societal costs of alcohol consumption (in Australia, \$183 million each day). Emmanuel strongly argued that there is a fundamental conflict of interest between the alcohol industry's goal to maximise alcohol sales and any organisation whose purpose is to improve or promote public health and wellbeing. He encouraged drowning prevention advocates to critically evaluate corporate relationships and query the implications of working with the alcohol industry.

Linking the day's previous discussion to drowning prevention, Dr Hannah Calverley, Manager – Research and Evaluation at Life Saving Victoria, provided a synthesis of research on alcohol and drowning informed by her PhD thesis on young adults' involvement in

alcohol-influence aquatic activity.(5) Hannah discussed the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 and broke down key findings from research on alcohol and drowning from the last 30 years including insights on alcohol-related drowning epidemiology; knowledge attitudes and intentions of young people; alcohol advertising around waterways; and alcohol focused drowning prevention campaigns and interventions. The presentation also identified the major gaps in our knowledge and the questions that remain on the topic.

Workshop participants were asked to discuss and scribe their takeaways from the first session. Common themes and questions included:

- Alcohol consumption is common in Australia, and changes to cultural norms can be challenging.
- Stories and lived experiences are powerful; emotionally impactful experiences draw attention to real-world implications of policy issues and inspire meaningful steps toward change.
- Any interaction or potential collaboration with the alcohol industry should be closely examined in terms of counterproductive effects and potential conflicts of interest; we should be wary of corporate tactics and pervasive marketing.
- Drowning prevention organisations need to examine corporate relationships to align with organisational direction.
- Policy changes are likely to have the greatest impact for alcohol-related drowning prevention.
- We still need more information on applied/actual interventions, what works and what doesn't?
- What is the blood alcohol level that impacts swimming and water safety abilities?

Session 2

Session 2 continued with a review of data on drowning fatalities involving alcohol and other drugs by Stacey Pidgeon, National Manager of Research and Policy at Royal Life Saving – Australia. Some key findings include:

- 21% of drowning fatalities recorded alcohol present, coroners in half of these cases reported that alcohol contributed to the death.
- 69% of cases where alcohol was present had a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) above 0.05%, the legal limit to drive a vehicle.
- BAC of drowning fatalities was reported the highest among persons aged 35-44 years.
- 10% of drowning fatalities recorded illicit drugs present.

Session 2 wrapped up with a presentation from Associate Professor Justine Leavy, Curtin University, Associate Professor Gemma Crawford, Curtin University, Ms Lauren Nimmo, RLSSWA and Dr Tina Lam, Monash University, on the [Water Alcohol Advertising Evidence \(WAVE\) project](#).

The team argued that discussion of the role of the alcohol industry within drowning prevention and water safety has been limited. They discussed ‘aquatic alcogenic environments’, as social, physical or cultural settings that promote or encourage alcohol use. These alcogenic environments are driven by the impact of the alcohol industry which employs pervasive marketing tactics to ensure drinking is seen as part of everyday life.(6,7)

Justine, Gemma, Lauren and Tina presented an overview of the Healthway funded WAVE project – a multi component study in Western Australia involving reviews of young people’s alcohol use in aquatic environments;(7) the presence of alcohol advertising and policies in those environments; analysis of alcohol brand’s Instagram accounts; and young

people's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to alcohol, alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and participation in aquatic activities.(8)

Insights included the importance of the commercial determinants of health,(9) the presence of public health policies and alcohol advertising in public spaces and/or near waterways, and the need to focus on populations, places and spaces instead of individual risk factors. The research provides a basis for recommendations to inform policy and advocacy to reduce alcohol-related harm in young people near water.

Workshop participants were asked to discuss and scribe their takeaways from the second session. Common themes and questions included:

- There are gaps in our knowledge relating to our understanding of the toxicological data - 33% of deaths involvement of alcohol and other drugs unknown.
- Age groups involved challenge our perceptions, it is not always young men.
- Do we need to focus more on long-term behaviour change (e.g., drinking and alcohol permissive culture) rather than on a certain demographic?
- Why do we use 0.05% BAC as a cut-off when we don’t know the true levels of risk associated with alcohol consumption before or during aquatic activities on, in, or around water?
- More research is needed on the role of illicit drugs in drowning.
- The issue is complex: lifesaving clubs sell alcohol which enables them to be community hubs, attract and retain members, and fund lifesaving activities; ceasing alcohol sales may have impacts.

Session 3

The first part of Session 3 involved a tabletop activity designed to further explore the topic of alcohol and drowning prevention. Each table was divided into two teams that debated for or against a statement. Teams were assigned, and thus several workshop participants had to play 'devil's advocate' and present arguments for another side of the issue. The two debate statements were:

1. We should focus on policy efforts over education efforts.
2. Collaboration with the alcohol industry should be avoided in all circumstances.

The debates provided an opportunity for rich discussion and examination of our beliefs and positions, with careful consideration for other alternative viewpoints and arguments.

Session 3 ended with a live presentation via Zoom from Matt Croxall, Charity Director for the Royal Life Saving Society – United Kingdom, who woke up very early to join the discussion! Matt presented on a recent project in the UK that involved a joint RLSS-UK and Malibu Drinks [campaign](#) involving UK Olympic gold medallist [Tom Daley](#). From inception to design and delivery, Matt shared lessons learned from the project and engaged in discussion with workshop participants on a variety of topics including campaign evaluation, risk management, and brand awareness. The session provided a salient and concrete case study to examine in the context of the day's discussions on partnerships with the alcohol industry and the impact of alcohol in drowning prevention and water safety efforts.



Session 4

Expanding the workshop focus from alcohol to a broader discussion on risk taking, Dr Jaz Lawes, National Research Manager for Surf Life Saving Australia, provided an overview of key concepts related to risk, risk taking behaviour, risk perception, and how we might think about risk as drowning prevention practitioners and researchers. Taking the group on a quick review of evolutionary biology, Jaz discussed how some risk is necessary to help us learn limits and make safer judgements and that risk is different for different people, situations and conditions. Jaz challenged the group to think critically about communication, our intellectual approach to 'risky behaviour' and what we can do to make a difference.

Building upon the previous presentation, Maree Patsouras, a research officer and PhD candidate with the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at La Trobe University, described how alcohol is a multiplier for risky behaviour. Maree's presentation underscored how risk taking is intrinsically related to impulsivity and sensation seeking, which is maximised in combination with alcohol. Explaining findings from research in the drink-driving space, Maree presented information on alcohol's impact on decision-making, reasoning, and processing; and highlighted the lack of knowledge and information on alcohol's influence related to aquatic activity.

The final presentation in Session 4 was delivered by Dr Pete Kamstra, post-doctoral researcher at the University of Melbourne. Pete's presentation challenged the group to think about how we educate people about risk. Pete argued that our business-as-usual approach to community engagement was insufficient, and based on flawed assumptions that people lack awareness and would change their behaviour if they were more aware of the

risk. Describing novel findings from a research study in Lorne, Victoria,(10) Pete highlighted the power and impact of a normative learning approach, that is, efforts that seek to influence worldview and values. Pete's presentation, with support from other flood and bushfire research projects, showed that neither awareness nor information gain (cognitive learning) were predictive of behaviour change and a reconsideration of our educational approaches is warranted.

Workshop participants were asked to discuss and scribe their takeaways from the fourth session. Common themes and questions included:

- Repeated experiences are feedback that inform our ability to gauge risk.
- Risky behaviour is an important part of life and our brain development.
- Risk is dynamic and different for everyone.
- Risk awareness does not result in safe behaviour - skills are more important than knowledge/awareness.
- Alcohol changes perception of risk and the ability to cope; and is related to impulsivity and sensation seeking.
- We need further discussion and thinking about the intersections of hazards, exposures and vulnerabilities in the drowning prevention space.
- It would be helpful to provide further definitions of what 'risk taking behaviour' means relevant for drowning prevention action.

Sessions 5 and 6

Sessions 5 and 6 were working sessions focused on evaluating the Alcohol and Risk Taking sections of the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, and co-developing a series of workshop actions for progress, presented in the following section.



Section 3. Essential actions for progress

With regard to alcohol and other drugs and risk taking in drowning prevention, workshop participants discussed, prioritised and co-drafted the following list of essential actions. This call to action summarises the core takeaways and messages from the workshop.

Investigate alcohol industry relationships

Illuminate the impact of the aquatic alcoholic environment. The influence of the alcohol industry on drowning prevention and water safety efforts requires careful investigation, with a focus on priority populations. Further consideration of the industry's contribution to, and involvement in, water safety and aquatic sport is warranted. Drowning prevention and water safety organisations should consider developing policy regarding appropriate partnerships, sponsorships and funding models.

Lean into smart collaboration

We do better together. Foster innovative, multisectoral partnerships and a systems approach that facilitates wide-reaching stakeholder relationships to embed drowning prevention strategies across sectors and settings.

Emphasise story telling

Stories are powerful. Identify opportunities to highlight and build the capacity of people with lived experience to support them to share their stories.

Determine the role of alcohol in drowning

Build the knowledge base. Prioritise research that provides evidence quantifying the impact of alcohol and other drugs on swimming, floating, and other aquatic activities.

Develop, implement, and evaluate interventions

Evidence-informed practice needs practice-informed evidence. More interventions are needed that specifically address alcohol and other drug-related drowning, with a focus on evaluating impact, beyond reach or attitudes and knowledge. Importantly, evaluation results should be shared widely to enhance drowning prevention and water safety strategies.

Focus on policy regulation

National action requires policy engagement. Advocate for the development and enforcement of nationally consistent government policies to remove aquatic imagery (location and activity) from alcohol advertising, and restrict alcohol consumption in and around waterways.

Define 'risk taking'

Understanding risk is critical but it is poorly defined. There is an urgent need to better understand and define risk-taking in the context of drowning prevention and water safety to develop effective mitigation strategies.

Embed approaches that consider the commercial determinants of health

Commercial entities influence health and well-being. It is essential to embed a focus on commercial determinants of health in drowning prevention and water safety efforts.

Move towards impactful normative engagement

Awareness is necessary but not sufficient. Better engagement is needed with communities to support the development of skills that reduce drowning risk and lead to sustained behavioural change. Normative engagement models provide promising ways of working towards this goal.

Employ place-based approaches

Start with the places that people live and recreate. Increase collaboration between land & waterway managers on place-based risk management approaches; embed drowning prevention in this process by understanding and integrating local community needs, environmental conditions, and recreational activities.

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Further Reading

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Appendix 1 – Workshop Participants

With gratitude, we thank and acknowledge the workshop participants:

Mike Anderson, Surf Life Saving NSW

Tyler Bedurke, Darebin City Council

Hannah Calverley, Life Saving Victoria

Gemma Crawford, Curtin University School of Population Health

Geoff Dickson, La Trobe University Centre for Sport and Social Impact

Rosamund Dickson-Hoyle, City of Darebin - Reservoir Leisure Centre

Natalie Edwards, Surf Life Saving Queensland

Samantha Fine, Surf Life Saving Australia/QLD; Central Queensland University

Dan Graham

Jai Haddock, La Trobe Sport

RJ Houston, Royal Life Saving Australia

Peter Kamstra, University of Melbourne

Will Koon, Royal Life Saving Australia

Emmanuel Kuntsche, La Trobe University Centre for Alcohol Policy Research

Tina Lam, Monash Addiction Research Centre, Monash University

Jaz Lawes, Surf Life Saving Australia

Alana Leabeater, Life Saving Victoria

Justine Leavy, Curtin University School of Population Health

Bernadette Matthews, Life Saving Victoria

Vicky McKay, Sandringham Life Saving Club

Elsbeth Muir

Lauren Nimmo, Royal Life Saving WA

Maree Patsouras, La Trobe University Centre for Alcohol Policy Research

Biju Philip, La Trobe University Business School

Stacey Pidgeon, Royal Life Saving Australia

Sarah Podesta, Belgravia Leisure

Justin Scarr, Royal Life Saving Australia

Jessica Serpiello, La Trobe Sport

Paul Shannon, Life Saving Victoria

Martin Shaw, Ambulance Victoria

Vanessa Spark, Safe Transport Victoria

Shae Wiggins, Department of Justice and Community Safety

Michelle Windsor, Department of Justice and Community Safety



Appendix 2 – Workshop Agenda

<p>DAY 1: Wednesday, October 16th</p> <p>9:30 - Arrival and Networking Coffee</p>
<p>10:00 AM - Session 1</p> <p>Welcome and Introductions</p> <p>Wasted: A story of alcohol, grief and a death in Brisbane Elspeth Muir</p> <p>In the hot tub with the alcohol industry: Conflict of interest and drowning prevention Professor Emmanuel Kutsche, La Trobe University, Centre for Alcohol Policy Research</p> <p>Under the influence: identifying determinants of young adults' involvement in alcohol-influenced aquatic activity to improve drowning prevention efforts Dr Hannah Calverley, Life Saving Victoria</p> <p>Q&A Panel Discussion</p>
<p>12:00 PM - Lunch</p>
<p>3:00 - Session 2</p> <p>Diving into the data: Alcohol-related drowning in Australia Stacey Pidgeon, Royal Life Saving Australia</p> <p>Alcohol consumption and drowning prevention: Lessons from Western Australia Associate Professor Gemma Crawford, Curtin University School of Population Health Associate Professor Justine Leavy, Curtin University School of Population Health Lauren Nimmo, Royal Life Saving – Western Australia Dr Tina Lam, Monash University Addiction Research Centre</p> <p>Workshop Session: Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 – Alcohol and Drugs Focus Area</p>
<p>2:30 Afternoon Tea</p> <p>Walking tour of the Home of the Matildas and Victoria State Football Centre</p>
<p>3:00 - Session 3</p> <p>Workshop Table Debates Interactive activity exploring key issues of alcohol and drowning and prevention.</p> <p>Don't Drink and Drown Campaign: An insider's look at the Royal Life Saving UK partnership with Malibu and Tom Daley Matt Croxall, Charity Director, Royal Life Saving Society United Kingdom</p>
<p>5:00 PM - Evening Networking Social Light entrees, 0% beers and mocktails!</p>



DAY 2: Thursday, October 17th

9:00 AM - Session 4

Welcome and Reflections

Risk taking and drowning in aquatic environments

Dr Jaz Lawes, Surf Life Saving Australia

What you need to know about: Alcohol and Risk Taking

Maree Pastouras, La Trobe University, Centre for Alcohol Policy Research

Normative learning is the mechanism through which behaviours are changed: the case of a drowning prevention intervention

Dr Peter Kamstra, Community Engagement for Disaster Risk Reduction, University of Melbourne

Round Table and Workshop – Defining risk taking for drowning prevention

10:30 AM - Morning Tea

11:00 AM – Session 5

Workshop Session:

Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 Evaluation and Revision
Risk Taking and Alcohol and Drugs Focus Areas

12:30 PM - Lunch

1:30 PM – Session 6

Workshop Session:

Defining our next steps by co-drafting a workshop statement

Session will close at approximately 3:00 PM