



# 'I SAW IT IN THE NEWS TODAY'

## A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FATAL DROWNING EVENTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN NEWS MEDIA

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### BACKGROUND

- Fatal drowning events are often reported in news media.
- News articles are a key source of health information;<sup>1</sup> recognised as a significant source of public health information;<sup>2</sup> and posited as the most influential element of mass media in Australia.<sup>3</sup>
- Media exposure has been shown to influence people's health behaviours and helps to set the public agenda.
- News media often sensationalises stories and report those that are unusual or extraordinary.
- Fatal drowning events that involve toddlers, young males, dramatic circumstances and powerful imagery are often featured.<sup>4</sup>
- The opportunity to inform readers using drowning prevention expert commentary, and to influence people's behaviours to prevent drowning may be overlooked for attention-grabbing headlines, images and accompanying narrative.<sup>1,5</sup>

This study examined coverage of fatal drowning events in newspapers, in Western Australian (WA) over two summer periods (2014-2016).

### METHODS

- WA coronial data were collected for age, gender, location and description of fatal event for two time periods: 1 Dec-31 March 2015 and 2016 (southern hemisphere summer).
- A three-step approach was utilised to capture print and online news articles which corresponded to coronial data: (1) Media Alert monitoring reports; (2) Google News; and (3) Factiva.
- Media articles met the criteria: matched a WA coronial drowning death record and/or within 21 days post-event; reported in print or online format in WA media; included demographic information.
- A coding protocol extracted: newspaper name, print/digital, page, news angle, population group, responsibility for the drowning event/drowning prevention, event outcome and prevention strategies.
- Coding was conducted by three researchers; inter-rater coding comparisons were made on a random sample of 25% of the articles (n=12). Agreement was 100% for 21 of the 23 coding categories.
- A qualitative approach was used to identify the news angle and categorised thematically.

### RESULTS

- Final sample of 50 news articles comprised 60% (n=30) print and remaining online news articles (n=20)
- 50 individual news articles matched 17 drowning events over 2 time-periods
- Almost half (n= 23) related to one toddler event
- Stories rarely appeared on page 1 (n =2)
- One fifth (22%) of articles employed a news angle relating to *community spirit* including the contribution of water police, police divers and volunteers. *Celebration of life* was the news angle used in one-fifth (22%) of the articles consisting of testimonials of the personal qualities of the deceased.
- Cause of drowning (14%), the location (16%) and the tragedy of the actual discovery of the dead body (14%) were of almost equal proportions

Table 1: Article details, date and profile of drowned person

Articles n (%) n=50	Date	Profile	Location
23 (46)	09/12/2014	Toddler, male, metropolitan	Lake
7 (14)	26/12/2015	Adult, female, CaLD, metropolitan	Beach
7 (14)	25/01/2016	Adult, female, regional	River
5 (10)	06/02/2015	Adult, male, regional	Beach
5 (10)	17/01/2016	Adult, male x 2, regional	Ocean
2 (4)	24/01/2016	Adult, male, outer metropolitan	Beach
1 (2)	02/02/2015	Older adult, male, metropolitan	Beach

Table 2: News angle and example headline

News angle	Example headline (n=50)	n (%)
<b>Celebration of life</b>	Drowned woman hailed as 'angel' Dead friends loved the water	11 (22)
<b>Community spirit</b>	Sam Trott search: 100 SES volunteers to join hunt for missing Perth toddler Sleep put aside for Sam	10 (20)
<b>Well known location</b>	Surfer dies at Smiths Beach Mandurah Drowning	8 (16)
<b>Tragedy</b>	Tragic end: Police divers find missing toddler Sam Trott's body Search ends in tragedy	7 (14)
<b>Cause of drowning</b>	Two dead in Dampier boating tragedy Man dies after being pulled unconscious from Mandurah beach	7 (14)
<b>Missing person</b>	Missing toddler gone in seconds out open door Woman missing after kayak capsizes	5 (10)
<b>Call to action</b>	Plea for surfers to watch out for each other Family wants surfer son's death to prompt change	2 (4)

### DISCUSSION

- In this study, drowning events were considered newsworthy by WA news outlets.
- However, the paucity of page one stories suggests drowning is not high on the news agenda.
- Additionally, WA news media do not present drowning from a public health perspective, focusing on tragedy and emotion versus the opportunity for prevention or call to action.
- Newspapers provide an inexpensive means to provide health information capable of influencing the public and professionals to respond to injury prevention.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Working closely with journalists and editors responsible for news content including dedicated sections that feature stories on health, safety and well-being is an important strategy going forward.

### SO WHAT?

Engaging news media to change the approach from the tragic and forensic to a focus on awareness, education, policy guided by expert commentary to reduce drowning for all population groups is crucial.

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