Swim deaths a wake-up call for parents

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The South Coast exerts a powerful gravitational pull on Canberrans in the warmer months, evidenced by their heavy presence on beaches north and south of Batemans Bay at Christmas time. They're also over-represented in water rescues. Of the 10 people plucked from the water after encountering difficulties this summer, eight came from Canberra and two from Queanbeyan. They were fortunate their difficulties in the water ended benignly.

Surf Life Saving NSW has reported that there were 53 deaths along NSW beaches in the 2015-16 financial year, the worst coastal drowning toll on record. As risky as the beaches might appear, the nation's rivers, creeks, dams and lakes remain the most hazardous places in which to swim. According to a Royal Life Saving Society, Australia, study of drownings from 2002-12, inland waterways claimed 1050 lives while 927 lives were lost on beaches and in the oceans and harbours. Swimming pools accounted for 436 drownings, and bathtubs and spa baths 207.

Alcohol and reckless behaviour in the water were features common to many of those drownings, with the RLSS study indicating 40 per cent of people who drowned on inland waterways had been drinking beforehand. And the role of alcohol may well have been higher had blood alcohol readings been collected in 100 per cent of adult fatalities rather than just 80 per cent. In light of this, RLSS chief executive Justin Scarr has canvassed the introduction of random breath testing for swimmers. It's an unusual proposal, for while there are prohibitions on alcohol and boating, it's not an offence to swim while intoxicated – and even if it were illegal, how would authorities effectively patrol the hundreds and thousands of places at which recreational swimmers gather each summer?

Education and awareness remains the best means of minimising the number of drownings each year. That includes community service announcements, adequate signage around popular swim spots, and the reinforcement of messages about water safety and situational awareness in schools. Ensuring that as many children as possible can swim strongly and confidently is crucial too.

In post-war Australia, many if not all children were encouraged to learn to swim from an early age, either under the tutelage of their parents or at swim schools. More recently, however, that imperative seems to have waned, with the RLSS noting this year that only one in seven Canberra kids can swim 50 metres by the end of Year 6. The withdrawal of government subsidies for the society's Swim and Survive program in 2014 may not have helped matters. However, it's likely there are other factors at work, including a belief among some parents that the acquisition of swimming skills as of secondary importance to their children's personal development. The ease with which weak swimmers, young and old, can get into difficulty is a reminder that parents have a critical role to play in helping reduce accidental drownings.