The big question: How should we stop so many people drowning in Australia?

The 2016/17 summer in Australia saw a sharp and tragic increase in the number of drownings. In NSW alone, 22 people had drowned by the start of January, nearly double the number of road fatalities recorded in the same period.

Drownings around the country have included toddlers, adults and older people and have occurred in back yard pools, the sea and rivers. Two important factors have repeatedly been identified as significant in these drownings: swimming inexperience and alcohol.

The increase in the number of drownings has led to calls for action. In terms of tackling swimming inexperience, suggestions have included increasing the general level of education about swimming and making swimming lessons mandatory for primary students. A criticism of this last suggestion is the cost involved and the onus it puts on the government to educate children in essential life skills, rather than parents doing this task.

In terms of alcohol and drowning, Royal Life Saving Society of Australia executive Justin Scarr has proposed the introduction of random breath testing of swimmers. While this suggestion has generally been met with criticism that it is impracticable, there is a clear consensus that we need to do something to reduce drownings that occur because of intoxication.

Quick facts:

- An average of 292 people drown in Australia each year
- Of the 280 people who drowned in the 2015/2016 year, only 35 were 17 or under
- Most people who drowned in 2015/2016 were aged between 25 and 45
- 40% of the 770 people who drowned in inland waterways from 2006-2016 had an alcohol level that would have failed a driving breath test
- It is now mandatory in Victoria for primary schools to provide swimming lessons to students
- There is no extra government funding given to primary schools in Victoria for swimming lessons
Arguments that...we need radical action to reduce the number of drownings

- Over the last twenty years there has been a significant decrease in the national road toll around Australia in the wake of increased breath testing, advertising and restrictions on young people. There has been virtually no long term decrease in drownings. That’s why we need radical action.
- Why is breath testing of swimmers any more impracticable than testing drivers? Police simply need to patrol popular beaches and swimming holes at peak times and test people.

Snap perspectives

Alcohol and swimming don’t go together

Justin Scarr, CEO of Royal Life Saving Australia, urged swimmers to swim responsibly to prevent further drownings. "Men need to stop taking unnecessary risks when swimming, fishing or boating this Australia Day and for the rest of the summer period," Mr Scarr said. Children under five in swimming pools were the most common victims of a further 66 cases of near-drownings, where rescue and resuscitation were needed. These "non-fatal drownings" often lead to neurological problems, due to a lack of oxygen while unconscious underwater.

Mr Scarr advised supervising parents to remain vigilant during social gatherings over the long weekend and to abstain from drinking. "Children drown quickly and silently; it is important that children are actively supervised within arms' reach at all times," he said.

As reported by the Sydney Morning Herald

Swimming lessons need to be free and effective

I am all for compulsory swimming lessons along as they are made free to those who cannot afford it and heavily subsidised for others. When implementing a policy such as this, the bureaucrats need to examine all the practicalities involved. Just some examples include that it would be useless for making a swim program compulsory for students that live in remote areas; they may not even have access to a pool or even attend main stream school. When implementing a swim program we need to make it effective. When I had swim lessons at school, they were so rushed because of the time constraints etc. I only learned to swim properly because my parents were in a position to take me to after school swim programs, where I was in small groups and this was done not just in a few lessons. Not all families are in this position. If we are serious about children knowing how to swim then we need to to implement an accessible program for all that isn't a half baked cake; not one that just ticks the box of the school curriculum.

Comment reported by The Courier

Arguments that...we need a measured response to drownings

- Radical measures like breath testing swimmers will not make a significant difference to the number of drownings, because police will only ever have the resources to test a few people. We need a more sensible solution such as engaging or shocking advertising campaigns along the lines of the one used to reduce the road toll.
- It’s important that all schools provide swimming lessons to students. This is the most basic, practical way we can ensure all people in Australia have a minimum level of experience with swimming.