



## **Rise in preventable deaths reflects growing pressure on water safety sector**

Provisional figures from Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) for 2017 show a 13% increase in preventable drownings on the previous year. There were 88 preventable drownings in 2017 versus 78 in 2016.

"I can't sugar coat it," says CEO Jonty Mills. "The water is our playground but it's incredibly unforgiving."

There is an obvious connection between drownings and the weather and the early onset of summer in 2017 contributed to the spike.

However, Mills believes the problem goes deeper than that.

"Most of the time, it comes down to poor decision making in the general sense. That's why most drowning deaths are considered preventable."

Spikes in the under-fives and over 65 age groups are features of the 2017 figures.

"For under-fives, the only fool-proof solution is constant active adult supervision. Also, we are living longer healthier lives and retirees are more active which adds additional risk" says Mills.

Female fatalities have almost doubled, reflecting higher participation rates across a wide range of activities and there were twice as many accidental immersions in 2017.

"Accidental immersions are people who ended up in the water when they had no intention to. This reinforces how important it is to think about water safety around any aquatic environment" says Mills.

Preventable fatalities in Auckland have doubled, while the West Coast has the highest drowning rate per capita.

"New Zealand's drowning problem is a complex one. We have a very diverse and growing population with very high participation rates across a wide range of different activities and aquatic environments" says Jonty Mills.

Mills also warns of the widening gap between the water safety sector's ability to meet growing expectation and demand. "Sector resources are stretched beyond their capability. This is a sector which relies on volunteers and is predominantly non-government funded."

Mills believes all Kiwis need to take personal responsibility and is keen to work closer with government at both central and local level.

Drowning remains to number one cause of recreational death and number three cause of accidental death in New Zealand, with a social cost of over \$400m per annum to the country.

"We need to educate more to ensure our kids are coming out of the system with the skills, competencies and risk awareness to enjoy the water safely, as well as run ongoing campaigns to create a long-term attitude and behaviour change around water. We also need to secure the future of frontline water safety and rescue resources," Mills concluded.

The Water Safety code applies to all forms of water based recreation - Be prepared, watch out for yourself and others, be aware of the dangers and know your limits.

The 2017 Drowning Prevention Report (Provisional) is attached.

Regional figures for 2017 are available on request.

For safety tips and other information visit [www.watersafety.org.nz](http://www.watersafety.org.nz)

## **ENDS**

\*Preventable drowning fatalities are those where water safety sector intervention could have had an influence (for example where the victim was boating, swimming, diving) while non-preventable drowning deaths include events such as suicides, homicides and vehicle accidents (where water safety education and activity would not have prevented the death).

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