

125 YEARS OF DROWNING PREVENTION

Drowning is one of the major causes of preventable death throughout the world. **Clive Holland**, Deputy Commonwealth President of the Royal Life Saving Society, outlines the importance of a Commonwealth focus.



According to a 2014 report from the World Health Organisation, drowning is responsible for killing 372,000 people every year – and more than 90% of those deaths occur in low and middle income countries (LMICs), many of which are part of the Commonwealth.

The Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS), which was founded 125 years ago and has Member Branches in around half of all Commonwealth nations, is uniquely placed to offer leadership on research, training and innovation to combat these preventable tragedies.



ABOVE: RLSS Commonwealth President HRH Prince Michael of Kent chaired the Society's Commonwealth Council during the 125th Anniversary Conference in London.

The foundation of the Society

The Swimmers' Life Saving Society was founded in 1891 by champion swimmer William Henry, and achieved the 'Royal' designation in 1904 on the orders of Edward VII. 20 years later, it received its formal Royal Charter from King George V. Today, its Commonwealth President is HRH Prince Michael of Kent, GCVO, and HM The Queen its Patron.

As RLSS Deputy Commonwealth President, I believe our 125th Anniversary is a perfect opportunity to strengthen the links between our current Member Branches and encourage more Commonwealth countries to affiliate to the RLSS.

In the 30 or so years since I first got involved, the Royal Life Saving Society has become more inclusive and now focuses firmly on the particular needs of each nations' people. Low and middle income countries are represented on all our committees, for example, and play a huge role in formulating policy. This is vitally important, as many are small island states which have significantly different 'drowning profiles' than larger countries such as the UK, Canada and Australia.

The WHO Global Report on Drowning recognised that drowning threats in poorer countries more often relate to transport and work-based activities, whereas in richer countries, where fewer people travel precariously by water or rely on the sea, rivers and lakes for their livelihood, drownings more often occur as a result of leisure activities.

Survival Swimming

One of the initiatives being launched this year aims to establish Survival Swimming programmes in all member countries. This teaches the minimum skills required to survive an unexpected fall into deep water: keeping the head above the surface, and then moving to the nearest point of safety.

Survival Swimming is 'back to basics' water safety. When someone starts to drown, the outcome is often fatal. Survival usually depends on the speed of removal from the water and how quickly proper resuscitation can take place. So embedding basic swimming and lifesaving education, skills



LEFT: Survival swimming lessons in India.



RIGHT: RLSS instructors working with children in Australia.

and leadership can make a real difference to communities around the world.

In Canada, the Swim to Survive programme is offered by the Lifesaving Society in all provinces. In 2012, the Ontario branch helped the programme in St Lucia, offering funding and organisational support, and the aim there is to reach 400 students, from age seven to adult, by the end of 2016.

Successful Survival Swimming programmes are also established in Bangladesh and India, both based on the lessons learned from initiatives in Canada and Australia. As part of our anniversary programme, RLSS will be encouraging member countries to share knowledge and resources with other countries in their region.

The fundamental message of our anniversary year is to ensure all our branches, in countries large and small, are aware of the significance of their membership of a huge Commonwealth family and the support, guidance and resources which that membership brings.

Anniversary celebrations

Our 125th Anniversary fell on February 7th and shortly thereafter we held a conference and celebrations in London. Delegates from around the Commonwealth attended a week of events including a reception with HRH Prince Michael at The Cavalry and Guards Club, a 'history tour' of important sites in the Society's development, and an Anniversary Dinner.

Around the Commonwealth, Member Branches are marking the anniversary with special championships, gala events and conferences; awarding 125th Anniversary

Service Certificates and HRH Prince Michael of Kent 125th Anniversary Certificates of Merit to deserving individuals; and contributing to an historic record of the Society's past and present. Members will also be represented at events such as the Patron's Lunch in June to mark the Queen's 63-year reign.

The events and initiatives of 2016 will have a huge impact on the future of the Royal Life Saving Society. Under the patronage of Her Majesty and the presidency of His Royal Highness, the Society can look forward to many more years serving the people of the Commonwealth.



125 YEARS OF
COMMONWEALTH
DROWNING
PREVENTION

327,000
people drown
every year

90%
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MORE INFORMATION

To find out more from the WHO Global Report On Drowning 2014, visit http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/drowning_global_report/Final_report_full_web.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clive Holland learned to swim at the age of 26 as a police cadet, progressing to teaching lifesaving in the 1980s and becoming chair of his local RLSS branch. He joined the Society's UK management board in 1997 and became its president in 2004. He has been Deputy Commonwealth President for over two years, liaising with the wider Commonwealth.

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