

TACKLING THE GLOBAL DROWNING EPIDEMIC

A CONFERENCE ON THE PREVENTION OF DROWNING WILL BE HOSTED BY THE LIFESAVING FOUNDATION IN GORMANSTOWN, CO. MEATH IN APRIL, WITH THE PRIMARY AIM TO PROMOTE RESEARCH INTO ALL ASPECTS OF THE GLOBAL DROWNING EPIDEMIC.

The Lifesaving Foundation's Drowning Prevention Conference in City North Hotel, Co. Meath, from 24 to 27 April will feature international experts on water safety and risk management.

"Our four-day annual conference provides an opportunity for all to meet and share their collective knowledge and experiences," explains John Connolly, honorary chief executive of the Lifesaving Foundation. A new feature of the 2013 conference will be DVDs containing presentations, powerpoint slides and papers/presentation notes for delegates.

Conference themes will include beach safety, holiday drownings, suicide by drowning and survival swimming.

Key participants include:

- Dr Tom Griffiths, founder of Aquatic Safety Research Group, who provides innovative water safety and risk management programmes to a wide range of clients throughout the US and internationally.
- Gerald Dworkin, Aquatics Safety and Water Rescue Consultant and founder of Lifesaving Resources.
- Peter George, chief operations officer of the Surf Life Saving Association Australia and chair of its Lifesaving Management Committee, and lifesaving commissioner for the International Life Saving Federation.
- Niall Ferns, coastal unit sector manager with the Irish Coast Guard.
- Dr Robert Stallman, Norwegian School of Sports Science, and Torill Hindmarch, pre-school teacher and a consultant with the Norwegian Lifesaving Society.
- Christina Fonfe, founder of the Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project.



FOUNDATION BACKGROUND

The Lifesaving Foundation is an independent organisation with no connection to any lifesaving agency in Ireland. It began as a sub-committee of The Royal Life Saving Society in Ireland (RLSS Ireland) before its incorporation as an Irish charity.

It is based in Ireland, but has an international membership that supports the development of lifesaving in over six countries in Africa and Asia and promotes research into drowning.

It aims to reduce the number of drowning deaths worldwide by conducting drowning related research, organising an annual research conference, publishing safety information and financially supporting water safety related projects.

It includes a number of international university professors and world leading medical doctors, along with members of small community organisations with few formal qualifications but a lot of practical experience.

The Foundation was born when the Royal Life Saving Society Branch in Ireland received a request to provide financial and technical support to a small lifesaving organization based in Mombasa, Kenya, back in 1999.

It was early 2002 by the time two pool lifeguard trainers travelled to Kenya to train a group of pool and beach lifeguards for employment in local hotels.

An internationally recognised lifeguard qualification would not only enable the individuals concerned to gain employment

but would also boost the local tourism industry. The project was so successful that further requests followed.

RLSS Ireland was not in a position to financially support a long-term project but a small group of members were interested in continuing so a new independent organisation was formed. It was incorporated as The Irish Lifesaving Foundation and registered as an independent charity in 2003.

WORLDWIDE PROJECTS

During the past decade the Foundation has run projects in Lesotho, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Gambia, South Africa, Kenya and India. It has also supplied clothing and equipment to lifesavers in Antigua, Barbados, Botswana, Gambia, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, St Lucia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

One of their most successful projects is the Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project, founded in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami.

In many countries, for cultural reasons, females are not taught to swim and during the tsunami the majority of those who died were females or children, consisting of up to 80 per cent of all casualties in some regions.

This project aims to reduce drowning deaths by using female swimming teachers to teach women and teenage girls to swim and then show them how they, in turn, can teach their own children and families to swim. The project is now incorporated as a charity in the UK.

DROWNING RESEARCH

The Foundation has tried to encourage local drowning research in developing countries with a view to the creation of water safety programmes targeted to local problems.

Unfortunately, it has had little real success with this project due to the low level of official reporting on drowning deaths in developing countries where it has a low priority.

"Our involvement in the 'Can You Swim' project aims to figure out why people known to be able to swim drown within a short distance from safety (accidental and suicidal casualties). "Meanwhile, our involvement with the International Open Water Drowning

Prevention Task Force aims to distil all available drowning prevention advice into a small number of universal phrases," according to Connolly.

Here in Ireland, the Foundation works with Irish search and rescue organisations on specific projects, such as Foyle Search and Rescue, Dublin Fire Brigade and Waterford City Fire Service on how to successfully deal with suicide by drowning.

IRELAND MEDAL

The Ireland Medal was introduced in 2004 as a joint project between the Irish Lifesaving Foundation and RLSS Ireland to mark the centenary of the RLSS branch and the birth of The Foundation.

A gilded sterling silver medal is awarded annually "to an Irish person or organisation or to a person of Irish descent in recognition of an exceptional contribution to saving lives from drowning".

Awarded nine times to date, the medal generates valuable publicity for lifesaving, and it frequently draws attention to hidden aspects of drowning.

For example, a study entitled 'The Success of Foyle Search and Rescue – Suicide Prevention and Rescue in the City of Derry, Ireland' (Wilson, Smyth & Connolly, 2010) showed that by reducing the number of annual drowning deaths in the Foyle River from over 30 to three, the local search and rescue team successfully prevented suicide by drowning.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Lifesaving Foundation
www.lifesavingfoundation.ie
- Conference Programme
www.lifesavingfoundation.ie/conference/index.php/program/preliminary/



SPECIFIC LIFESAVING PROJECTS OVERSEAS

A key aspect of the Lifesaving Foundation's specific projects is the applicability and transferability of what is taught or researched across national boundaries.

These projects include the following:

1. Personal Swimming Survival

Skills: The Foundation will support research into why persons who can swim drown, and what is lacking in their experience, knowledge or training that prevents them from swimming to safety.

2. Suicide by Drowning: *Suicide by drowning is present in every community and becoming a major challenge in the 21st century.*

3. Female Swimming Instruction:

The Foundation will build on the work of the Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project, with the aim of promoting female swimming instruction worldwide.

4. Lifeguard Training: *The Foundation will continue to financially support the training of unemployed swimmers as lifeguards in developing countries.*

5. Foreign Holiday Water Safety:

Visitors are much more vulnerable to drowning than residents of any area close to water. Research into this aspect of drowning will be supported.

6. Land-based Water Rescues: *The Foundation will promote research into land-based water rescues and the development of water safety programmes in developing countries.*

7. School/Youth-based Water

Safety Instruction: *Funding will be provided in support of water safety instruction embedded into national education or training programmes in developing countries.*