



Curtin University

“EVERYONE SHOULD BE
TAUGHT TO SWIM...”

EXPLORING WATER SAFETY AMONG OLDER ADULTS
(65+ YEARS) IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.




Project Overview

Meg Abercromby, Dr Justine E Leavy, Gemma Crawford, Lauren Nimmo.

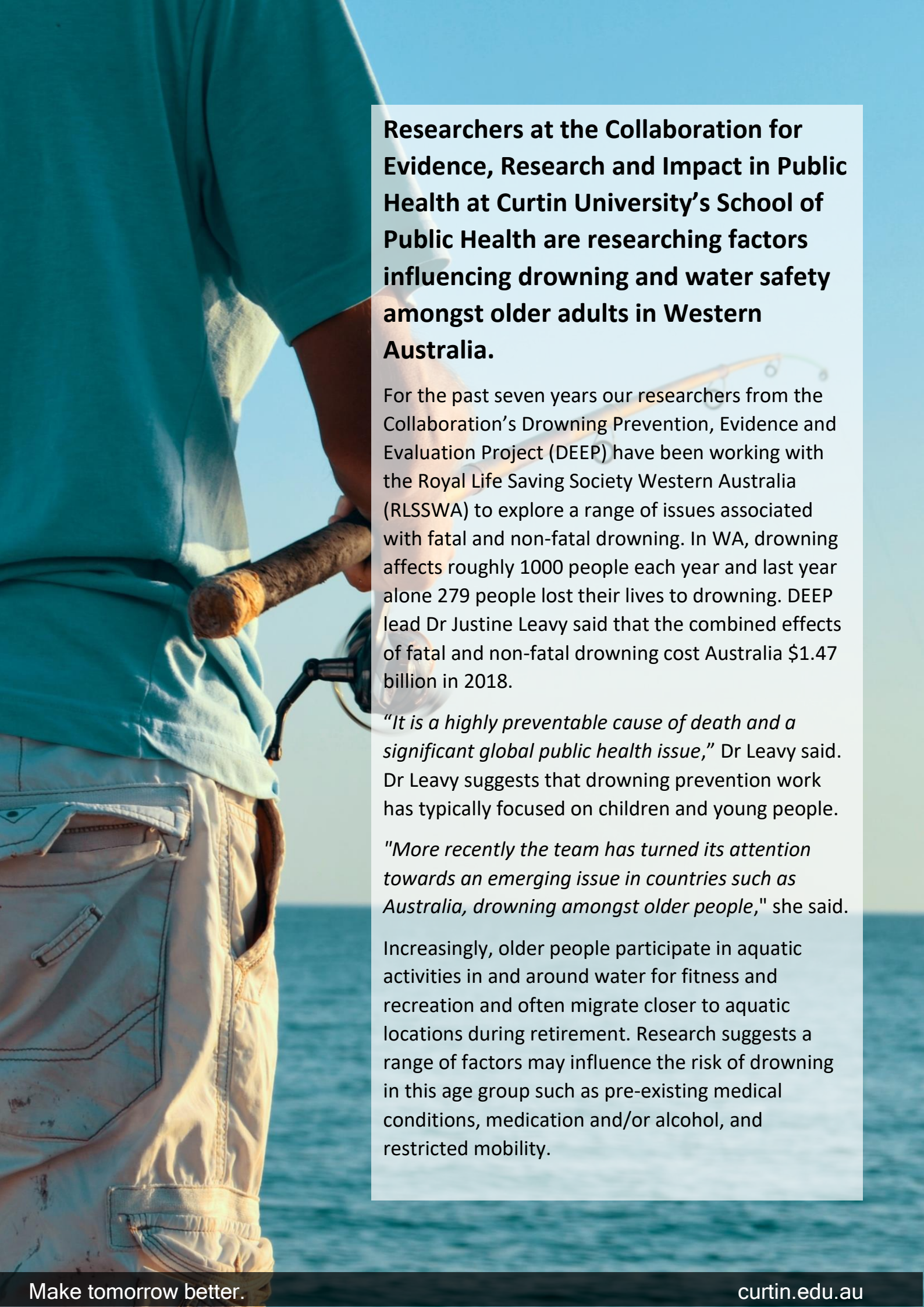
Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, Australia.

Royal Life Saving Society of Western Australia Inc, Perth, Australia.

A couple is seen from behind, sitting on a wooden bench that overlooks a vast ocean. The scene is captured during sunset or sunrise, with the sky showing soft, warm colors and the water reflecting the light. The couple's silhouettes are dark against the bright background. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the upper half of the image.

The **Collaboration of Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health (CERIPH)** drowning prevention team have recently been named the Drowning Prevention Evidence and Evaluation Project (DEEP). The DEEP team have extended their research and evaluation relationship with the Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia (RLSSWA) for the next five years. DEEP currently consists of Dr Justine Leavy, Gemma Crawford, Malena Della Bona and Meg Abercromby. The team are excited to continue their relationship with RLSSWA and look forward to evaluating the impact of current drowning prevention programs, specifically Keep Watch, the Youth Water Safety Program (previously Don't Drink and Drown) and now the new Adult Water Safety Program.

The **Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia (RLSSWA)** is a not-for-profit organisation, serving the community as the largest provider of water safety education in our state. Volunteers, members, trainers, employees and lifesavers are found in almost all communities. The RLSSWA health promotion team consists of Lauren Nimmo (Senior Manager, Health Promotion and Research), Rachel Murray (Keep Watch Coordinator), Georgia Eaton (Youth Water Safety Program Coordinator) and Stephanie Green (Adult Water Safety Program Coordinator).



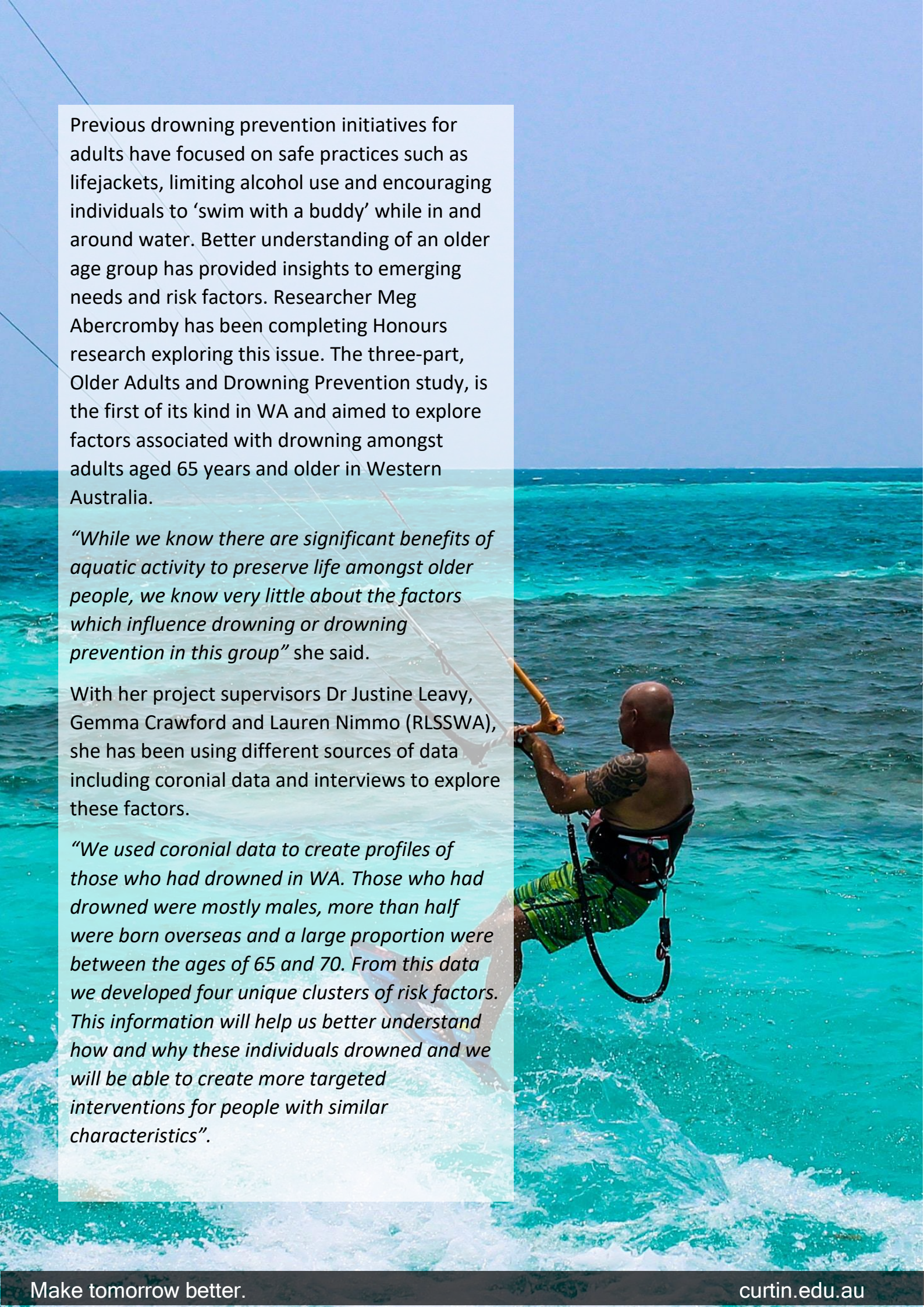
Researchers at the Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health at Curtin University's School of Public Health are researching factors influencing drowning and water safety amongst older adults in Western Australia.

For the past seven years our researchers from the Collaboration's Drowning Prevention, Evidence and Evaluation Project (DEEP) have been working with the Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia (RLSSWA) to explore a range of issues associated with fatal and non-fatal drowning. In WA, drowning affects roughly 1000 people each year and last year alone 279 people lost their lives to drowning. DEEP lead Dr Justine Leavy said that the combined effects of fatal and non-fatal drowning cost Australia \$1.47 billion in 2018.

"It is a highly preventable cause of death and a significant global public health issue," Dr Leavy said. Dr Leavy suggests that drowning prevention work has typically focused on children and young people.

"More recently the team has turned its attention towards an emerging issue in countries such as Australia, drowning amongst older people," she said.

Increasingly, older people participate in aquatic activities in and around water for fitness and recreation and often migrate closer to aquatic locations during retirement. Research suggests a range of factors may influence the risk of drowning in this age group such as pre-existing medical conditions, medication and/or alcohol, and restricted mobility.



Previous drowning prevention initiatives for adults have focused on safe practices such as lifejackets, limiting alcohol use and encouraging individuals to 'swim with a buddy' while in and around water. Better understanding of an older age group has provided insights to emerging needs and risk factors. Researcher Meg Abercromby has been completing Honours research exploring this issue. The three-part, Older Adults and Drowning Prevention study, is the first of its kind in WA and aimed to explore factors associated with drowning amongst adults aged 65 years and older in Western Australia.

"While we know there are significant benefits of aquatic activity to preserve life amongst older people, we know very little about the factors which influence drowning or drowning prevention in this group" she said.

With her project supervisors Dr Justine Leavy, Gemma Crawford and Lauren Nimmo (RLSSWA), she has been using different sources of data including coronial data and interviews to explore these factors.

"We used coronial data to create profiles of those who had drowned in WA. Those who had drowned were mostly males, more than half were born overseas and a large proportion were between the ages of 65 and 70. From this data we developed four unique clusters of risk factors. This information will help us better understand how and why these individuals drowned and we will be able to create more targeted interventions for people with similar characteristics".

PROFILES

Of the 93 cases:

86% were males.

41% 65-70 y/old.

51% born over-seas.



Men who
boat & fish in
company.



Affluent men
with poor
health who
swim.



Male tourists
who boat &
fish.



Mid-older,
who slipped
or fell.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Meg also interviewed people between 65 and 90 to find out about their experiences in, on or near the water and their perceptions about drowning prevention and water safety. The interviews found two types of people, those who perceived themselves to be strong swimmers and those who perceived themselves to be weak swimmers.

She suggests that those who identified as weak swimmers believed they were at risk of drowning, however we also found that people who identified as strong swimmers could not easily identify risks for themselves such as their own strength and ability or swimming alone.

Participants shared stories about fear, physical limitations and concerns about body image which highlighted a range of barriers to aquatic participation.

"I coined this the "sunset mentality" which represented the idea of increasing limitation as well as fading and termination in relation to experiences in, on or around the water" she said.

"I never had a thought about drowning. I thought as long as I could stay afloat I wouldn't drown" - Research Participant

Dr Leavy suggested that this information had provided a deeper understanding of an often overlooked but vulnerable group for water safety messages. The team is now using the data to inform the development of a population level survey to gain insights from a wider range of Western Australians. The research has also yielded a number of recommendations including the development of a new public education campaign for those aged 65 and older.

“We are excited that this research will be used by RLSSWA to inform the development of new strategies for this target group. The team look forward to our continued research partnership with RLSSWA and we are very proud to be contributing to the prevention of fatal and non-fatal drowning in WA.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

- The DEEP team are currently working with RLSSWA to conduct similar interviews with a younger segment of the target group (those 45-64 years).
- The team is developing a survey instrument to be distributed to a wider audience of people living across WA. The survey went live at the end of 2019 and data collection will finish in early February. The survey will capture a wider target group and the information gained will be used to inform a new RLSSWA campaign to address drowning among adults in WA.
- The team will also work to publish the findings from this study. This study will contribute to the sparse body of literature that addresses drowning prevention in older adults. Meg said, *“I am very grateful to those who volunteered their time to participate in this study. Your stories, words of wisdom, and generosity are what made this study truly unique. Thank you. I hope this work will in some way contribute to reducing loss of life to drowning in the future.”*

For more information about the project, or if you have any queries, please contact Meg Abercromby. You can reach her on 08 9266 4735 or via email her at meg.abercromby@curtin.edu.au.