

Drowning and near drowning in rivers

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The motivation for writing the Commentary on drowning deaths in rivers [1] came from two recent incidents that occurred in the Murrumbidgee River in the small Australian country town of Wagga Wagga.

The first occurred in late afternoon in summer when a group of men decided to go for a swim after work. None of the swimmers had consumed any alcohol. Although it was hot, there had been recent rain and the river was quite swollen, with a strong current and numerous eddies. During the swim one of the group grew tired, and as he headed towards the shore became caught in an eddy and started to submerge. Fortunately he was dragged ashore by his friends who later described him as feeling like a “dead weight”. The rescued swimmer was most struck by a sudden feeling of loss of buoyancy. Subsequently the role of significant but concealed river eddies in producing these effects was appreciated. Six weeks previously a 42-year-old man in the same stretch of river had not been so fortunate when he was dragged underwater from his wife’s arms and drowned [2].

These two cases draw attention to a situation that is often underappreciated in river drownings and near-drownings, even by professionals, where an apparently calm surface overlies quite strong currents and back eddies that can very quickly

overwhelm swimmers [3]. The high rate of drowning in rivers in Australia and other countries may in part be a result of this lack of understanding. The reported cases also initiated an analysis of specific issues that may arise in the medicolegal assessment of river drownings [1].

Finally, I would like to very sincerely thank the three colleagues and good friends, Peter Coleman, Adam Ford and Martin Keir, who managed to save me from a river drowning in Wagga Wagga, Australia, on Tuesday 14th February 2017.

References

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