

Risks of drowning and safety concerns at the beaches of Karachi — perspective from lifeguards

Masood Ali Shaikh

Abstract

Going to beaches is a popular pastime for many people in Karachi. Lifeguards have been deployed on many beaches for the safety and protection of beachgoers. This cross-sectional survey was conducted to study the opinions and experiences of lifeguards posted at eight beaches of Karachi. Ignorance among beachgoers about how dangerous it could be at seaside, was reported by 19 (61.3%) out of 31 lifeguards interviewed. Lifeguards had to put up with verbal and physical abuse while discharging their duties, with verbal abuse being the universal experience. Improved record keeping of drowning and near-drowning data would help make better evidence-informed beach-safety decisions in Karachi for reducing the morbidity and mortality burden owing to drowning.

Keywords: Drowning, Lifeguards, Karachi.

Introduction

Roughly half a million people succumb to drowning around the world each year, including at seas. This global public health problem has received scant attention in Pakistan.^{1,2} Drowning has been identified as a public health problem and a leading cause of unintentional injuries among children in Pakistan, and Bangladesh.^{3,4} It has also been reported to be an "overlooked" cause of cardiac arrest outside the hospitals.⁵ Probability of drowning increases in summer months, yet drowning is a preventable form of injury.^{6,7} Lifeguards play a pivotal role in preventing drowning.⁸ Karachi is the most populous and the maritime metropolis of Pakistan. There are no studies in Pakistan on the experiences of lifeguards and their opinions as to why people drown at sea. This survey was conducted to study the opinions and experiences of lifeguards posted at eight beaches of Karachi, including Hawks Bay, and Sands-Pit regarding reasons of why people drown and how it could be prevented.

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Independent Consultant, Block No. 7, Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi, Pakistan.

Correspondence: Email: masoodali1@yahoo.com

Methods and Results

This cross-sectional survey was conducted to study the opinions and experiences of lifeguards posted at eight beaches of Karachi, including Hawks Bay, and Sands-Pit; so as to determine the opinions of the lifeguards regarding drowning of people and its prevention. Lifeguards stationed at Karachi beaches were interviewed in July and August, 2012. An interviewer-administered, structured questionnaire with open and close-ended questions was used by the author, after obtaining verbal consent and ensuring confidentiality. Results were analyzed using STATA version 12, by calculating frequencies and percentages. Cumulatively, 31 out of 40 (77.5%) lifeguards stationed at the Karachi Municipal Corporation's Emergency Response Center at Hawks Bay, run by Fire Department were interviewed. Their mean age was 36.1 ± 7.5 years. Nineteen (61.3%) had either none or less than 5 years of education, 11 (35.5%) had 6-10 years of education and one reported 14 years of education. Mean duration of working as a lifeguard was 14.7 ± 6.8 years.

Summer months i.e. May, June, July, and August were reported by lifeguards to be the busiest time on the beaches, in addition to weekends, and national holidays like August 14, and Eid holidays. Ignorance among beachgoers about how dangerous it could be at seaside, was reported by 19 (61.3%) lifeguards, as the reason for why people visiting beaches do not listen/heed the warnings of lifeguards about not swimming during certain times of the day/year, swimming far out to sea, or avoid swimming in particularly risky areas of the beaches. Followed by showing off to one's friends/family/other present at the beaches; assumption that swimming in ponds or rivers is the same as swimming in the sea; competition as to who could swim farthest, drunkenness or under the influence of illicit drugs, and feeling that they are here on the beach to enjoy, so they do not need to listen to anyone about any potential hazards - especially those who have incurred expenses to come here - from other cities. Every lifeguard reported multiple reasons, with these additional reasons reported by 6 to 12 lifeguards. Table-1, provides the frequency of various experiences

Table: Respondent's experiences of violent behaviour, injuries, and reporting of drowning figures at the beaches of Karachi.

Factor	Frequency (%)
Someone ever shouted/cursed or made rude gestures at you while you tried to stop people from swimming or going to particular area on the beach, owing to its being dangerous or swimmers?	
Yes	31 (100%)
No	0
How many times it happened in the past 30 days?	
0 times	3 (9.7%)
1 - 5 times	16 (51.6%)
6 - 10 times	7 (22.6%)
>10 times	3 (9.7%)
NA*	2 (6.4%)
Has anyone ever threatened to physically hurt you while you tried to stop people from swimming or going to particular area on the beach, owing to its being dangerous for swimmers?	
Yes	29 (93.6%)
No	2 (6.4%)
How many times it happened in the past 30 days?	
0 times	13 (41.9%)
1 - 2 times	13 (41.9%)
>2 times	3 (9.8%)
NA*	2 (6.4%)
Has anyone ever actually physically attacked you or hit you while you tried to stop people from swimming or going to particular area on the beach, owing to its being dangerous for swimmers?	
Yes	27 (87.1%)
No	4 (12.9%)
How many times it happened in the past 90 days?	
0 times	19 (61.3%)
1 - 2 times	9 (29.0%)
>2 times	1 (3.2%)
NA*	2 (6.5%)
Have you ever suffered any injuries while trying to save a drowning person, in the past 90 days, which required a visit to a doctor/hospital or use of any medication/bandage?	
0 times	22 (71.0%)
1 - 2 times	5 (16.2%)
>2 times	2 (6.4%)
NA*	2 (6.4%)
Do you report and ensure to get recorded all the persons whom you save from drowning?	
No information recorded	1 (3.2%)
10% - 30%	10 (32.4%)
40% - 50%	16 (51.6%)
60% - 70%	2 (6.4%)
NA*	2 (6.4%)
Reasons for not recording.	
People reluctant to give information.	**21
Unavailability of writing material.	**8
Medical care necessitates immediate transfer to hospitals.	**11

NA = Not Applicable: Two of the lifeguards interviewed had been moved to desk duty.

** = Multiple reasons provided by the respondents, hence total frequency exceeds number of respondents interviewed.

reported by the respondents. Lifeguards had to put up with verbal and physical abuse while discharging their duties, with verbal abuse being the universal experience, albeit physical violence was also reported. Verbal abuse was defined as shouting, cursing, or making rude gestures, while physical abuse was defined as being pushed, or hit. Regarding measures to substantially reduce or prevent drowning deaths: all lifeguards 31 (100%) reported that police presence at the beaches would make their job much easier and would markedly reduce deaths due to drowning, as they themselves lack authority in enforcing people to restrict swimming at certain times or places. In addition lifeguards expressed the desire for provision of more life saving equipment, deployment of more lifeguards, need for the availability of a physician with an ambulance to provide first aid care onsite, and transport those who need urgent medical care to hospitals. Eighteen (58.1%) respondents also felt the need for deploying women lifeguards to save drowning women.

Conclusion

Going to beaches, especially in summer, is a favourite pastime for many people in Karachi. Lifeguards have been deployed on many beaches for the safety and protection of beachgoers. Yet lifeguards have to endure verbal as well as physical abuse in the line of duty to save lives and prevent drowning. Embedding police with lifeguards would ostensibly make their job much easier, as law enforcement presence would bestow authority and credibility; hence, ensuring that their instructions and advise is followed by the beachgoers. Results of this study underline the need for health education and promotion campaigns for beachgoers, better equipping and increasing the number of lifeguards including hiring of female lifeguards, in addition to provision of onsite medical care and transport facilities for better beach safety in Karachi. Finally better and improved record keeping of drowning and near-drowning data would help improve beach-safety in Karachi for reducing the morbidity and mortality burden owing to drowning.

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