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“We’re in the Same Boat – Brother!” Aquatic Movement Research and Drowning Prevention Research

Robert Keig Stallman and Per-Ludvik Kjendlie

Same Family: Two Branches—Collective Responsibility

The two branches of the aquatic research family have co-existed for decades: The aquatic movement researchers and the drowning prevention researchers. But they have not co-habited. Rather, they have behaved like estranged family members with limited contact, limited cooperation, and limited understanding. Indeed, they are still largely unaware of each other and of the huge potential mutual benefit that cooperation toward the same goals, to say nothing of the moral obligation to work together would accomplish (we discuss this more later).

Missed Opportunities

Although these parallel lines of research activity have followed their course for a very long time, as with two parallel lines in classic Euclidean fashion, they appear to never intersect. Even after the formalization of aquatic movement research (i.e., The International Symposium for Biomechanics and Medicine in Swimming [BMS], meeting quadrennially since 1970) and the formalization of drowning prevention research (i.e., World Conference on Drowning Prevention [WCDP], meeting quadrennially or triennially since 2002), little cooperation has been undertaken.

In 2002, BMS and WCDP (a.k.a., Drowning 2002) were held within a few days of one another *and* within a relatively short distance from one another. BMS (2006) and World Water Safety (WCDP), 2007 both were held in Porto, Portugal. In each case, at the most only 3–4 people (< 1%) attended both meetings. Why is this? After all, water is water, people are people, and death by drowning is swiftly

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final. The aquatic medium is common to both of these organizations. The target groups as well as the needs and interests are virtually the same among both groups. How is it possible to be concerned with the one and not with the other? There are far more common elements than there are differing elements. It should be obvious that to be concerned with one is *naturally* to be concerned with the other.

Our Common Interests

All aquatic activities have certain elements of risk, some common to all and some unique to the specific activity in question. Aquatic professionals engaged in all of these activities have a moral obligation to raise awareness of risk and of water safety. All are obliged to produce, practice, and promote the safety measures needed not only in their own activity, but also for the foundational skill and knowledge base common to all. And, not only for their own consumption but for the common pool of water safety knowledge. As an example we could ask, “how many paddling, rowing, or sailing clubs have a compulsory swimming requirement for membership?”

How is it possible that the study of aquatic movement economy as key to survival has largely escaped the attention of most of the high tech BMS branch of our collective aquatic family? How is it possible that the WCDP branch of the family has largely not considered that each individual drowning episode (and hopefully rescue) comprises physiological, biomechanical, psychological, and emotional phenomena? How is it possible that each side of the family has so rarely approached the other for cooperative and collaborative effort? We are, in fact, aware of research units in both branches of the family, in the same city, even the same university, which are nearly unknown to each other. This family of ours cannot survive well without both branches sharing their expertise and resources with one another.

Our Common Obligations and Concerns

Not only do all aquatic activities have a moral obligation to ally themselves with the global war on drowning but also all research disciplines ought to have a similar obligation. A drowning episode is multi-dimensional. The expertise of neither a single activity nor a single discipline can solve such a complex problem. Both sides in the past have generated hypotheses needing testing for which the other side might possibly have more expertise to carry out the research. Both have a moral obligation to share methods, technology, results, and best practices with each other. And better yet, a preliminary team effort will produce a wonderful cross-pollination of ideas and expertise which will generate even better hypotheses and even more elegant research protocols. Only cooperative and collaborative efforts across both disciplines and activities can make a serious impact on reducing the worldwide incidence of drowning. As another example, both BMS and WCDP organizations should be actively recruiting research from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, pedagogy, and even kinesiology. Biomechanics and physiology have dominated one organization while public health and medicine have tended to dominate the other.

Our Calls for Cooperation

This dilemma has caused us concern for many years. Our concern started when we noted how very few papers were delivered at BMS which were relevant to drowning prevention. Then, our concern grew when we realized how few people attended both of these international conferences which have many of the same goals, usually without knowing or understanding what they share. And finally, how few papers, especially those regarding rescue, are delivered at WCDP, which use the high tech methodology so commonly used in aquatic movement analysis.

Already in Porto in 2006 we presented a framework for future research in lifesaving and drowning prevention and then expanded that framework with an article in *IJARE* in 2008 (Stallman & Kjendlie, 2008). At the BMS 2010 meetings that we hosted in Oslo, we actively recruited papers from disciplines other than those that were typically popular. We even were so bold as to have invited keynote addresses by speakers from psychology, pedagogics, motor learning, and child development. As a consequence, we noted an increased number of oral and poster presentations from these formerly less active BMS areas. It was obvious that there was still a very long way to go.

This was evidenced again in Da Nang for WCDP 2011 where we repeated the same appeal but also gave concrete examples of newer research technology, especially in physiology and biomechanics, which could easily be applied to drowning prevention research, especially that applied to rescue. Most recently in Wroclaw, Poland in 2012, we actively appealed to the two branches of this family to unite in the common cause of reducing the global burden of drowning, under the same title as above.

We will be satisfied only when more research papers from across these artificial lines are presented at both meetings. Only when each of us, regardless of which activity or discipline we represent, actively reaches out to sisters and brothers in other areas of aquatics. And all of us must strive to raise the quality of our research. Some areas still cling to the past, dominated by practices based on tradition rather than evidence and research (e.g., learn-to-swim and rescue). Our own experience has shown that a quality research evidence base has the best chance of raising public awareness and of influencing national policy change and program planning.

You Are Expected!

We therefore EXPECT to see far more of you at BOTH the WCDP meetings next October (2013) in Potsdam and at BMS in Canberra in 2014. By your attendance, you will confirm your understanding of your obligation and confirm your commitment to reducing the global burden of drowning. As a result we all gain so much.

So you see, aquatic friends: "we're in the same boat - brother!" By the way, this is an English idiom (it is also a well known folk/blues song) and is in no way meant to exclude our "aquatic sisters." Indeed, one of the very few colleagues we see at both meetings is, in fact, our sister, Lillian Madsen from Copenhagen. In the immortal words of Huddie Ledbetter (aka "Leadbelly"): "We're in the same boat, brother! – If you shake one end, you're gonna rock the other!"

See you this year in Potsdam *and* next year in Canberra!