

## **Most fatalities due to drowning are preventable**

**Amsterdam, June 28, 2002 – Death due to drowning worldwide is preventable in eighty percent of all cases, according to over five hundred doctors, rescuers, and prevention specialists meeting at the World Congress on Drowning in The Netherlands. Their goal is to find ways to dramatically reduce the toll of drowning in the world, which is one of the leading causes of accidental death, particularly for children. The closing session of the three day congress takes place in the RAI Congress Centre today.**

The huge number of drowning victims worldwide, particularly in low income countries, was the major reason for organising the congress. Experts from forty different countries, ranging from beach rescuers to emergency room doctors shared their knowledge and experience to focus on the major areas of need and potentials for success. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), drowning is the primary cause of death in children (one to four years of age), for all ages, one of the five leading causes of accidental death. In particular in low income countries drowning is a major problem. Even in developed countries, drowning is a major problem.

Six years ago the Dutch Society for the Rescue of Drowning Victims took the initiative to bring together the world widely fragmented knowledge and experience and to initiate global actions for drowning prevention. Nine task forces, including eighty experts from different disciplines and countries, participated in this initiative. They developed an inventory of the major problems in drowning: the preventative approaches, the different methods for rescuing victims and the treatment of drowning victims.

## **Major Conclusions**

### Prevention is the key to solving the issue

Drowning is often preventable by simple measures like fencing bodies of water, including swimming pools and even wells, particularly in rural areas. In particular in third world countries, prevention is the key to reducing the huge number of drownings. Over ninety percent of all half million drowning deaths world wide occur in these countries. Even in industrialised countries, many lives can be saved by fencing private swimming pools and increasing beach safety.

Prevention requires a multiple approach aimed at all causes. Wearing of life jackets and making risk groups such as parents of young children and boaters more aware of the drowning risks are but two examples. Product design and development, in everything from buckets to boats, can be expected to reduce the risk of drowning. People must be made aware of the risk of water in all circumstances. Training and education are essential in this respect. The harmonisation of training procedures for and the medical examinations of divers and guidelines for children at school-age, are essential for the reduction of drownings in diving.

At the congress worldwide agreement was reached on the definition of drowning.

A common definition of drowning is essential to ensure proper identification of the who die or are seriously injured due to drowning. This provides critical information on the causes and circumstances of drowning to facilitate improvement in prevention, rescue and treatment. National authorities and UN-organisations like WHO are key players in this project.

International exchange should increase the effectiveness of rescue.

Survival chances of drowning victims can be best improved by immediate resuscitation delivered by by-standers and other rescuers. Therefore all citizens should possess basic skills in the first aid and resuscitation. Development of first aid competencies among the general population is possible through integration of first aid training in the educational system and by making training including permanent refreshment courses, mandatory a great number of professional groups among which fire-men and police. Also other professionals in the recreational domain, in public transportation and among cabdrivers should be considered in this respect.

Continuing improvement of rescue operations and more rapid resuscitation of victims are essential to increase the survival chances of drowned persons. This is a great challenge as rescue techniques are not well researched and significant improvement can be achieved world wide. Organisations like the International Life Saving Federation play a key role in this respect.

Treatment of seriously injured drowning victims should take place in specialised intensive care units.

The congress concludes that the knowledge in the medical treatment of drowning victims whose condition is severe is rather fragmented and therefore recommends that drowning victims be treated in special hospital prepared for these incidents. A particular problem in this respect is victims who suffer severe hypothermia. The risk of brain damage among hypothermia patients who arrive in coma in hospital can be significantly decreased by artificially maintaining body temp at 30 – 30 degrees Celsius during rewarming.

**Next steps**

The organisers have put forward the conclusions to the responsible international organisations such as the World Health Organisation, International Life Saving Federation, Divers Alert Network, and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Also national authorities and relevant international professional organisations will be contacted by the organisers with over 100 specific recommendations that resulted from the congress. Within two years a new status report will be produced and new initiatives will be taken. Regional initiatives like that of the European Child Safety Alliance today will contribute to the dissemination of the congress conclusions and the enhancement of the preventative actions.